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Thesis

DISCERNING HEARTS: CHRISTIAN ETHICAL CRITIQUE OF CIRCUMCISION

BY

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Thesis Abstract

This thesis argues that infant male circumcision is a legitimate and relevant social issue for the field of Christian ethics, and analyzes the range of contemporary Christian responses to circumcision in the United States, both academic and popular. Christianity played a role in the rise of secular medical circumcision in the Victorian period, and many American Christians practice circumcision today. Christians who oppose circumcision can productively assist the gradual, voluntary abandonment of the practice by discerning ethical, political, and theological lessons from Christian history. Christian critique of Jewish circumcision can mainly be found within the long, violent history of Christian teachings of contempt about Jews and Judaism. But today, some contemporary Christians oppose circumcision because of ethical concerns about bodily harm and well-being, rather than for religious reasons. However, anti-Judaism still creeps into some contemporary Christian anti-circumcision (“intactivist”) writings, which mainly come from evangelical and Catholic individuals, especially through their conservative interpretations of Paul’s letters. Progressive Christians are loathe to criticize a Jewish practice, but their commitment to pluralism and biblical scholarship, including the many new approaches to interpreting Paul’s relationship with Judaism, positions them to make a more intellectual and ethical contribution to the circumcision debate. This thesis examines strategies for intactivist Christians to balance their concern for the human rights of male infants, with awareness of their religious privilege and care for the cultural rights of religious communities that practice circumcision. It concludes with an exegesis of the second chapter of Luke and the circumcision of the infant Jesus, constructing Mary the mother of Jesus as a faithful Jew and a potential role model for Christians who are discerning a constructive response to circumcision.

Dedicated to

the Loretto Community,

friends of Mary at the foot of the cross

CONTENTS

<i>Preface: A Sword in the Heart?</i>	vi
<i>Introduction: Circumcision and Religion in the United States</i>	1
I. Christian Judgments of Circumcision in History.....	7
II. Christian Ethical Responses to Circumcision Today.....	17
III. The Sword of Discernment.....	32
<i>Conclusion: Toward a Heartfelt Gentile Christian Identity</i>	51
<i>References</i>	53
<i>Bibliography</i>	63

PREFACE: A SWORD IN THE HEART?

I wasn't always a Christian feminist who works to end the practice of male circumcision. Whereas I was born into Christian feminism, being the daughter of a 1970s second-wave feminist Catholic mother, I came slowly to the circumcision issue. One man in particular sweated blood, trying to get me to acknowledge his pain over having been circumcised and to see basic parallels with the practice of female genital mutilation, a comparison that disturbed my feminist sensibilities. Could a man really have been hurt as a result of his maleness? As I learned more about the effects of infant circumcision and forced myself to watch footage of the surgery, I began to wonder how Christian ethicists could be completely silent on this contemporary controversy in medical ethics. Exploring this as a possible thesis topic, I quickly discovered the stumbling stone: a subset of circumcisions are those practiced by Jews, and how could a Christian write about a Jewish practice with any kind of integrity?

I wish I could say that the silence on circumcision among progressive Christians which disappointed me is no longer my silence. Yet I have found in writing this thesis that circumcision is the hardest thing I've ever had to talk about. I've avoided it in conversations about my thesis work whenever possible, much to my shame. There is a certain pain in the heart that happens when one acknowledges, alleges, or even causes harm to a person's intimate anatomy or identity, by seeming to criticize their modified body or the expression of their precious cultural heritage. I have often pondered the biblical metaphor of "circumcision of the heart" in relation to the baggage I still painfully shed in my quest to talk about circumcision violence openly and

lovingly. Yet while continuing to care for my own and others' hearts in this heated controversy, I have come to reject the use of circumcision as a metaphor for clarification or liberation. For people who have experienced circumcision in negative ways, it can only be a terrorizing metaphor. Medical historian David Gollaher quotes anti-circumcision activist Tim Hammond:

Awareness that this was done to you is something that a lot of circumcised guys more or less stumble upon. If he reads enough he eventually learns that this circumcision was not only unnecessary, but deprived him of fully functioning genitalia. This widespread ignorance before such an awareness occurs is a kind of *mental circumcision*. Later when he gets the message that people are uncomfortable talking about it, and he is treated like it's not important or that he shouldn't question it, a man becomes aware of being cut off from society, and then a deeper *circumcision of the soul* sets in.¹ [Emphasis mine]

Gollaher comments, "There is irony in Hammond's choice of words. Whereas St. Paul's 'circumcision of the heart' metaphorically included an uncircumcised Gentile in the community of the Christian faithful, Hammond's 'circumcision of the soul' expresses a profound sense of alienation."

Indeed, in this project I considered many instances of biblical language and Christian theological concepts relating to circumcision, and ended up setting most of them aside as being incompatible with my anti-circumcision perspective. As I sought foreskin-friendly metaphors for the feelings I was experiencing through this research, I went from thinking of my heart as "circumcised," to the more neutral "pierced," to simply altered or modified, and now to stretched or restored. The new metaphors have also turned out to be more resurrection-friendly than the

¹ David Gollaher, *Circumcision: a History of the World's Most Controversial Surgery* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 180. Gollaher is quoting from Hammond's report on the Harm Documentation Survey conducted by NOHARMM in 1994.

fascination with crucifixion and redemptive suffering I gained from my Catholic upbringing, resulting in a change in my personal theological outlook that I never expected.

Somewhere on this journey I learned to take the sword out of my heart, based on my belief that knives do not belong in people's anatomy, whether physical or spiritual. What I was left with was a sword of intellectual discernment that I could wield at histories and texts which claim to offer good news. Despite my choice to reject inherently pro-circumcision metaphors in Christianity, I still believe that Christian resources have a role to play in advancing healing within the circumcision issue. While the multifaceted reconciling mission of Christianity, as pioneered by the radical Jew Paul of Tarsus, will not be advanced by continued Christian criticism of a Jewish religious practice, neither will it be advanced when those who are uncircumcised negate the pain of men from all faith backgrounds who happen to grieve their circumcisions. Living with a heart voluntarily stretched by tensions and empathy for other people's different kinds of hurts is a way to grow personally, as the human family collectively grows into the multiple restorations God has planned for us. I would like to thank Matthew A. Taylor and Marcus Page for being my fierce and loving companions for this long-term transformation.

I would also like to thank Marcus for being my tireless library assistant as well as reading drafts of this work. I also thank Matthew again for reading drafts and for all the lengthy, transformative conversations and raw feedback. Livi Yoshioka-Maxwell also read a full draft and gave me academic feedback from her discipline of literature. I thank the faculty at Episcopal Divinity School for sharing guidance, comments, resources and helpful conversations on my project, including Katherine Stiles, Joan Martin, Kwok Pui Lan, Christopher Duraisingh, Larry

Wills, and Stephen Burns. My advisor Gale Yee guided my study of feminist ethics and theology and then went on to read at least five drafts of this ever-evolving project. Her detailed corrections have been immensely valuable, while all sorts of flaws remain that are entirely my own. Lastly, I would like to thank the country veterinarian who castrated my baby goat last week, giving me the tiniest taste of what it would have felt like to watch my future child's circumcision, as Mary of Nazareth possibly did for her son, if the contemporary debate about circumcision had not reached my heart.

Chelsea Collonge

Holy Week 2014

INTRODUCTION: CIRCUMCISION AND RELIGION IN THE UNITED STATES

Do Christians practice circumcision? Should they? What should they think about faith traditions that circumcise their members? Christians have answered these questions in different ways over the centuries. In light of the medical significance of circumcision in the past century, it is time for new answers. As debate about the ethics of infant circumcision goes on around the Church today, churches remain silent on this issue. This contemporary silence stands in stark contrast to the role that discourse about circumcision played in Christian history. The goal of this essay is to propose infant circumcision as a legitimate and relevant social issue for the field of Christian ethics. I hope to motivate a greater number of progressive American Christians, of a variety of denominations, to approach circumcision as a deliberately discerned personal decision, a collective moral issue, a public civil rights struggle, and a potential topic for interfaith dialogue with Jews and Muslims.

Twenty-five years ago, James B. Nelson, professor of Christian ethics at Twin Cities United Theological Seminary and one of the first Christian intellectuals to address human sexuality in a positive light,¹ made a pointed reference to circumcision in his book *The Intimate Connection*:

The time is overdue for our own exploration [of male sexuality and masculine spirituality], for our own reassessment, and for our own fresh learnings. We know it is overdue when we hurt. Male sexual health is not a particularly bright picture at the present time. What are some of the current [1988] facts? Though more male babies are born each year in our society (106 to 100 females), fewer males survive past the first six months. During the first year of life the male death rate is one third higher than that of females. Part of the reason may well be the different ways in which baby boys are treated. Some research suggests, for example, that the greater susceptibility of males to sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) is because boys have less touch and physical nurture early in life. The large

majority of boys in America are circumcised within three days of birth. This still occurs even though the national organizations of obstetricians and pediatricians have long questioned the medical necessity of routine circumcision. It is a procedure typically done without anesthetic and one that causes more pain to the infant than is often acknowledged. Further, incidences of infection, hemorrhage, and surgical trauma are considerably higher than is usually recognized, nor do we know how to assess the emotional trauma.²

Nelson gave voice to male pain and vulnerability in his attempt to articulate an anti-patriarchal spirituality for men. He reflected, “What are the spiritual meanings of the male genitals? The question has seldom been asked, particularly in Christian conversation and literature.”³ Indeed, to this day, none of his colleagues in the field of progressive Christian sexual ethics have taken up circumcision as a relevant human rights issue. Christian feminist ethicists have been silent on circumcision, except to denigrate its significance in comparison to female genital mutilation.⁴

Female genital surgery has been illegal in the U.S. since 1996, regardless of its cultural value to certain immigrant communities. When it comes to males, the American medical establishment remains one of the very few in the West to offer routine infant circumcision, which rapidly declined in Europe and never caught on in non-Western societies. The prevalence of infant male circumcision in America peaked in the 1970s and has since been dropping, but the practice is still highly contested. Although routine circumcision has not been recommended as a medical practice by a national medical association for decades, the American Academy of Pediatrics’ new task force on circumcision has begun to officially promote it again, as a means of reducing the risk of HIV transmission and several other diseases. The American Medical Association has long held that it is acceptable for doctors to circumcise infants by parental preference, especially when parents request it for cultural or religious reasons.

The contemporary Western movement to end circumcision and promote the benefits of the intact penis is called “intactivism,” connected with other movements to end involuntary genital cutting of female, intersex, and male children globally. Intactivists view all methods of infant male circumcision as unjustified foreskin amputation, a violent practice that could accurately be referred to as partial penis amputation.⁵ Circumcision is the nonconsensual, painful removal of a part of a person's body that is healthy and functional, that belongs to them, and about which they should have a choice. It is an invasive use of force that carries medical risks as well as inherent injury and harms, as the foreskin has sexual functions that might be valued by the person later in life.⁶

Out of the 60-70% of male American infants who are circumcised each year, the vast majority of these circumcisions are done for secular medical reasons, which emerge from a medical history that is connected to Victorian Christianity. Out of the solid majority of North American Christians today who circumcise their infant sons, almost all do it for aesthetic or medical reasons, not religious ones.⁷ Circumcision as a religious practice is most associated with Jews in the public mind, as Jewish circumcision often occurs in a liturgical setting. American Muslims also practice religious male circumcision in infancy or childhood, but it is non-ritual and takes place in a medical setting.⁸

The intactivist movement is largely secular but does include Jewish, Muslim, and Christian participants. Jewish intactivists play a key role in promoting voluntary cultural change when it comes to circumcision, adapting Judaism’s diverse traditions. While working alongside intactivists of all stripes on medical and policy reform, Jewish intactivists offer crucial leadership as advocates within their Jewish families, religious communities, and cultural institutions.

Although individual Christian intactivists may be circumcised and therefore victims, especially in the United States where circumcision is common among Christians, gentile Christians as a group are not religiously targeted for circumcision as Christians. The project of Christian intactivism as a whole therefore plays an ally role to Jewish intactivists.

Jewish circumcision is a significant mark of ethnic and cultural identity for the Jewish people. As a religious ritual, Jewish circumcision is based in the sacred texts that Christians refer to as the Old Testament (especially the first five books, the Jewish Torah). It is therefore interconnected with Christian scripture, tradition, and history. Circumcision has played a large role in the Christian theological imagination, affecting our notions of salvation, identity, mission, even the mechanics of baptism. Christian ideas about the meanings of circumcision have also affected the meanings this Jewish practice has had within Judaism. Because Jewish circumcision is arguably intercultural and inter-religious in its construction, all Christians share in the responsibility for its harms. Working to end circumcision does not necessarily exempt Christian intactivist groups⁹ from this complicity.

Indeed, many secular intactivists blame circumcision-violence on religion in general, despite the participation of Jewish and Christian intactivist groups. Disturbed and frustrated by religious reasons for circumcision, and repelled by the ritual and sacred trappings that sometimes surround it, intactivists may see religion as irrational, violent, oppressive, and divisive. The thinking goes, if religious communities do something as crazy as cutting their infants' genitals in the name of God, then everything they do and say is suspect. This includes the Bible, because of the violence done in the name of scripture. As New Testament scholar Jennifer Wright Knust summarizes the situation, “Those who value circumcision have promoted it ... turning to the

Bible to explain their perspectives. Those who reject it have appealed ... arguing that the Bible is outmoded, obsolete, or irrelevant.”¹⁰ Those Jewish and Christian intactivists who do value the Bible may thus provide a unique third perspective in this conflict.

Religion does indeed complicate circumcision politics in the United States. Our national religious culture includes the presence of great religious diversity as well as the constitutional separation of church and state. Government can neither establish a state religion nor make laws infringing the free practice of religions, as long as their practices are considered non-harmful to individuals’ rights. This is why, in 2011, a judge struck down a citizen’s initiative to put the Prohibition of Genital Cutting of Male Minors (a comprehensive circumcision ban) on the ballot in San Francisco, after the initiative had garnered 12,000 signatures.¹¹ A group that authored similar bills, www.mgmbill.org, had produced a cartoon about Jewish circumcision that resembled Nazi propaganda, and Fox News picked up the scandal.¹² In the aftermath, all such future initiatives were outlawed by the California state legislature.

Western Christians who come to oppose circumcision and join the intactivist movement should learn that they need to proceed carefully, because of the great importance of circumcision in Jewish culture and its deployment as a trope of Christian anti-Semitism, yesterday and today. Today, for the first time, some Christian opposition to circumcision is being motivated principally by concern about bodily harm and well-being, rather than denigration of Judaism. Yet how can religiously privileged Christians balance concern for the human rights of male infants targeted for circumcision, with concern for the rights and value of cultures that we have subordinated? Despite the challenge of walking this knife edge, Christians could productively assist the gradual, voluntary abandonment of circumcision by discerning ethical, political, and

theological lessons from the judgments Christianity made in the past and the effects those judgments had on others. What follows is a constructed account of the history of circumcision in Judaism and Christianity that seeks to discern these lessons.

CHRISTIAN JUDGMENTS OF CIRCUMCISION IN HISTORY

In the last ten years, a number of scholars have worked to construct various histories of Jewish circumcision. These accounts indicate that Christianity has opposed circumcision in ways that do not augment principled critiques of the practice. During centuries of oppressive power imbalances between gentile and Jew, Christianity and Judaism, imperialism and religious supremacy have fused circumcision to notions of identity, which powerfully influence people's daily lives and concrete cultural practices, including bodily practices like circumcision. By denigrating circumcision, Christianity has magnified the value of circumcision as a marker of identity, resistance, and cultural survival for the Jewish people. At a key moment in history, Christianity also empowered the entrenchment of secular medical circumcision in the Victorian Age. It provided positive cultural meanings for the new type of circumcision, to bolster a certain kind of contemporary Christian identity and supplement the surgery's alleged physical benefits.

Histories of Jewish circumcision cannot specify how and when circumcision began in ancient Israel. Certainly by the sixth century BCE, circumcision was common enough for some of the editors of Genesis to write about it in religious terms. Genesis 17 is the most important scriptural text about circumcision. It is one of several stories in which God makes a covenant with Abraham. In the story, God commands Abraham to circumcise himself, his sons, his male slaves, and every male descendant at the age of eight days. God also promises Abraham descendants and the land of Canaan, that Abraham will be the father of nations, and that God will be God to him and his offspring. Furthermore, God specifies that this covenant is

everlasting. God says, “Thus shall my covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact. And if any male who is uncircumcised fails to circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his kind; he has broken My covenant” (Genesis 17:13b-14).¹³ Other Hebrew scriptures mention circumcision or the absence of circumcision, including verses and stories in Genesis 34, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Joshua, 1 Samuel, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah.

There are many theories about why circumcision became a collective and religiously meaningful practice in ancient Israel. Some believe that God and Abraham established the practice, or at least that it was inspired by some kind of religious discernment about how to be God's people and express devotion to God. It may have had more to do with male fertility, patrilineal descent, or the marking of patriarchal religious privilege.¹⁴ Perhaps it was about purification, or initiation. Some speculate that as a male-led ritual involving birth and blood, circumcision was a response to women's fertility.¹⁵ Some materials about circumcision in the Jewish scriptures may be older than the sixth century BCE. However, the appearance of the material is related to the time period when these books of scripture came together. During this time, the ancient Israelites were reformulating their identity in light of the end of the Davidic dynasty and Kingdom of Judah, exile in Babylonia, and return under Persian rule. Themes of identity and covenant were salient in these situations.

Circumcision took on additional layers of meaning for the Jewish people in the three centuries before the Common Era. This occurred under Greek Egyptian and Greek Syrian rule, both in the land of Israel and in the Diaspora. Ancient Greeks and Romans did not circumcise and felt very averse to the physical practice. They also viewed it as a significant and stereotypical marker of Jewish identity, and looked down on the Jewish people for it.¹⁶ In 167 BCE, the Greek

Syrian King Antiochus IV Epiphanes suppressed the practice of circumcision in Jerusalem, partially sparking the Maccabean revolt (1 Macc 1:48-60). According to the historian Josephus, the Maccabeans and the resulting independent regime, the Hasmonean family, forcibly mandated circumcision. The Jewish writing First Maccabees also portrays Jewish mothers resisting the former ban on circumcision to the point of death.¹⁷

There is evidence that some elite Jews in the Hellenistic world practiced epispasm (stretching of the foreskin) in order to conceal their circumcision and protect themselves during nude exercise,¹⁸ including those who identified with their Hellenistic conquerors and competed in the Jerusalem gymnasium (1 Macc 1:11-15). The Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria would later defend circumcision in his writings, indicating a controversy among Jews about whether circumcision had to be physically performed or could be allegorized.¹⁹

Roman rule of Judea began in 63 BCE, and repression of circumcision continued to occur on occasion, hand-in-hand with oppression of the Jewish people. Several leaders in the Roman Empire legislated against circumcision of non-Jews, linking it to castration which was illegal. For example, the emperor Hadrian's ban on circumcision was one of the factors leading up to the Jewish Bar Kokhba revolt in the second century CE. Roman rule is also the backdrop of the controversy that arose early on in Christianity about circumcision. The apostle Paul of Tarsus, a Hellenistic Jewish missionary to the gentiles (non-Jewish peoples) in the first fifty years of the Jesus movement, wrote about circumcision in the letters that became part of the Christian New Testament. Paul argued strenuously in letters to early Christian communities in Galatia,²⁰ Corinth, Philippi, and later in Rome, that gentile joiners of this originally Jewish sect did not have to be circumcised (or, we can surmise, circumcise their children, although Paul is not

worried about transmission of the faith to the next generation because of his apocalyptic expectations).²¹ Paul did not, however, argue for abolishing the commandment of circumcision for the Jewish followers of Jesus, stating in his letter to the Romans that the value of circumcision was “much in every way.”²² Rather, he bragged about his own circumcision and the status it gave him as a member of God's covenanted people,²³ said that those who were circumcised (aka Jews) should not seek uncircumcision [presumably referring to epispasm, foreskin restoration],²⁴ and even circumcised his helper Timothy.²⁵

Moving into the post-biblical era, the Jewish religious ceremony of circumcision, *brit milah* (covenant of circumcision), evolved from simply cutting the foreskin, to destroying and removing it completely (*brit periah*). Eventually, rabbinic Judaism developed a three-step procedure, whose level of invasiveness and severity is emulated in modern secular circumcision.²⁶ Circumcision occurs frequently in the writings of the early rabbis, as well as the early church fathers, including Justin Martyr, Origen, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine, and the Venerable Bede.²⁷ Their writings span the period from before the establishment of Christianity as the state religion under the Roman emperor Constantine, to the fall of the Roman Empire and beyond. As Christianity was gradually being established as a religious institution separate from the emerging framework of rabbinic Judaism, four intellectual moves came to characterize Christian attitudes toward circumcision: stereotyping, fear, appropriation, and replacement. Gentile-dominated Christianity took a cue from Rome and reproduced circumcision as a significant and unflattering stereotype of the Jewish people. Church father Origen in the third century CE named it as “the disgrace which is felt by most

people to attach to circumcision.”²⁸ Christians, being gentile and therefore uncircumcised, tended to fear circumcision, both as a physical practice and as a sign of inferior Jewish identity.

In tension with these negative attitudes, early Christian theologians also sought to appropriate the spiritual aspects of circumcision as a religious antecedent and supplement to Christian baptism. In an effort to downplay the significance of Jewish circumcision as a physical, ritual, ethnic practice, ancient Christians turned circumcision into a biblical metaphor and theological symbol that could be more universally applicable by applying only to the spirit, not to the body. Appropriating certain Hebrew prophetic traditions, such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel, they found it useful to insist on the primacy or singularity of a spiritual “circumcision of the heart.”²⁹ As such circumcision could symbolize a set of moral virtues to be imitated, such as obedience, self-denial, and renunciation.³⁰ Additionally, replacing the bodily ritual of circumcision with the symbolic ritual of baptism, for both infants and converts, was a liturgical expression of the new replacement theology, in which Jesus's “new covenant” between God and the gentiles superseded³¹ or supplanted the “old” Israelite covenants.³² Christians then held themselves to be separate from and superior to Jews because they practiced spiritual, not physical circumcision.

In this theological milieu of late Antiquity, marked by the labeling of heresies in the attempt to establish orthodoxy, a lot of ink was spilled about why Christ was circumcised. Why would God in Jesus allow Himself to be marked by an inferior Jewish ritual? Most concluded that Jesus allowed himself to be circumcised to “pass” as a Jew in order to better reach the Jews, but he was not really a Jew. They also connected his circumcision to the crucifixion, arguing that he chose to undergo the ritual so as to be the last one to ever be circumcised, fulfilling the

sacrifice and putting it to an end. Eventually there would be official liturgies and feast days commemorating the circumcision and naming of the Lord, often celebrated on January 1st.³³ Starting in the sixth century and peaking in the early Renaissance, a cult of veneration of Christ's infant foreskin developed. Christians believed it to be a holy relic supernaturally given to the emperor Charlemagne and appearing in a number of different churches. In medieval and Renaissance art, on the other hand, the naked body of the adult Christ was often depicted uncircumcised, because the sacred body and the body politic could not be allowed to look like the Jewish outsiders living in Europe.³⁴ Art that depicted the infant Jesus getting circumcised connected it to crucifixion, emphasizing its pain and depicting the Jewish people involved in an ugly, violent light.³⁵

All this Christian discourse on circumcision obviously had an effect on the Jewish people as their religious identity evolved in the post-biblical era. Rabbinic Judaism would come to maintain the central place of circumcision in Jewish life and theology. Responding to the Christian argument that baptism was better than circumcision because it included women in the covenant as well as men, many medieval rabbinical scholars wrote down different interpretations of why Jewish men are circumcised, ascribing to it many purposes and benefits, from the practical to the scriptural to the mystical.³⁶ But the political and physical repercussions were worse. Jews came to be reviled as feminized through circumcision, hopelessly carnal rather than spiritual, and worse, bloody and dangerous. The “blood libel,” closely connected to dread of circumcision, was a Christian fantasy that Jewish people engaged in ritual murder of Christians. In the late Middle Ages, widespread persecution of Jewish communities was crowned by several

cases in which groups of Jewish men were executed for allegedly circumcising and murdering Christian children.

The history of circumcision took an interesting turn in the 19th century, when two ostensibly Christian nations, Britain and America, began to promote circumcision as a secular medical practice.³⁷ In the Victorian Era, doctors began to diagnose any childhood condition they could not cure as a symptom of “onanism,” a term for masturbation coined by Swiss doctor S. A. Tissot (based on the biblical character Onan, who was punished for spilling his seed in Genesis 38). In their search for a cure for this variety of diseases they thought were caused by masturbation, they landed on surgical amputation of the foreskin and clitoris as a convenient means of treatment and prevention.³⁸ The openly admitted discovery that foreskin removal reduced sexual pleasure was agreeable to Victorian Christians who viewed sexuality as negative for a variety of reasons. It was a time of hypermasculine Christianity that sought to beat back feminist political reforms through masculine self-discipline and control of sexuality, as well as demonstrate racial and cultural superiority over colonized and immigrant people who were labeled as less clean.³⁹ In 1935, a doctor who was improbably named R.W. Cockshut wrote, “Nature intends that the adolescent male shall copulate as often and as promiscuously as possible, and to that end covers the sensitive glans so that it shall be ever ready to receive stimuli. Civilization, on the contrary, requires chastity, and the glans of the circumcised rapidly assumes a leathery texture less sensitive than skin.”⁴⁰ The Victorian campaign against masturbation, and sexual pleasure itself, was a racialized enforcement of a certain vision of Christian “civilized” sexuality over and against “heathen” sexuality.

Many doctors, mostly non-Jewish but some Jewish, promoted circumcision surgery into the 20th century, as medical rationales for it shifted to diseases related to hygiene and sexually transmitted diseases. While sexualized horror of Jews by Christians persisted in the Victorian Age,⁴¹ mainstream publications began to make positive statements about the Jewish people and the medical wisdom of their “age old” practices, with Moses being cast as a great healer.⁴² In 1871, when less than five percent of the U.S. male population was circumcised, M. J. Moses wrote, “I refer to masturbation as one of the effects of a long prepuce; not that this vice is entirely absent in those who have undergone circumcision, though I never saw an instance in a Jewish child of very tender years, except as the result of association with children whose covered glans have naturally impelled them to the habit.”⁴³ In 1963, by which time 85 percent of the U.S. male population was circumcised, a popular book by Dr. S. I. McMillen called *None of these Diseases* taught that the loving Father of the New Testament was the same “stern” Father of the Old Testament, who mandated circumcision because it was actually really good for His children.⁴⁴

The type of foreskin surgery that eventually became a routine medical practice for hospital-born boys in the United States matches the process of *brit periah*, in which the foreskin is torn from the infant glans in order to remove it completely. The main difference between the procedures is that the medical one is performed by a doctor or nurse, whereas the Jewish religious one is performed by a professional ritual circumciser (*mohel*), and has a third step of sucking the wound. The Jewish reform movement, which began in Germany in the 19th century, when Jews sought more acceptance and a degree of assimilation to the style of Protestant Christianity and the Enlightenment ethos, sought to medically regulate *mohels* because of

infection from the third step. In 1843, the lay-led Society for the Friends of Reform went so far as to suggest that circumcision should be abandoned, provoking a firestorm of rabbinic and popular backlash.⁴⁵ Reform Jews may have been setting aside most features of orthodox religious observance, but circumcision was still too important to be touched.

Today, the vast majority of Jews in the United States circumcise their male infants on the eighth day, whether in hospital or religious settings. They do so for a variety of religious and spiritual reasons, grounded in rabbinic tradition, Kabbalistic spirituality, or more contemporary personal or family traditions. In addition, many Jews who do not have religious beliefs about circumcision, circumcise for reasons of ethnic identity and cultural survival.⁴⁶ In puzzling out why this rather dramatic, ethically complicated form of observance would be one of the last things to be given up by nominally connected Jews, many point to the collective trauma of the Holocaust, which was inspired and enabled by centuries of Christian anti-Semitism. In an article in *Tikkun* magazine about his ultimate decision not to circumcise his son, Jewish historian of masculinity Michael S. Kimmel writes about possible Jewish reasons for circumcising:

A close friend, a child of Holocaust survivors, told me the story of his uncle, who was not so lucky [as the Hellenistic Jewish youth who expanded their foreskins to pass as gentiles in the ancient world]. His was the now-classic story of the young man, sneaking his way onto a train leaving Germany, under the watchful eyes of the Nazis. When caught, he was forced to strip in the station, and when it was discovered that he was circumcised, he was shot on the spot. Here was a political reason to circumcise, a slap in the face of anti-Semitism, a way to connect my son to a history of resistance against anti-Semitism, and to recognize the ways in which physical difference (whether congenitally or culturally derived) is grounds for discrimination.⁴⁷

The close friend Kimmel refers to, Harry Brod, is also a historian of masculinity. He reflects that when he circumcised his son, it was a way of refusing to give up Jewish identity in the face of

the kind of danger his uncle experienced and paid for with his life. Yet Brod says that he hopes his sons will make a different choice. Paraphrasing E. M. Forster, he writes, “Mindful of the pain of circumcision... if I had to choose between betraying my tradition and betraying my son, I hope I would have the guts to betray my tradition.”⁴⁸ From America to Israel, Jews today are questioning and in some cases resisting circumcision. Led by Jewish intactivists, a controversial debate on circumcision has taken place within Jewish communities in the U.S. A number of alternative covenantal rites for newborns have been developed, often called Brit Shalom (“covenant of peace”) instead of *brit milah* (covenant of circumcision). Yet this communal struggle comes at great personal and collective cost.⁴⁹ Can Christians be allies to Jewish intactivists in this struggle, despite of and in light of our historical harms? The next section covers a variety of responses to Jewish circumcision made by Christians today.

CHRISTIAN ETHICAL RESPONSES TO CIRCUMCISION TODAY

Since the 1960s, Jewish-Christian relations are in a much better place; every major Christian denomination has repudiated supersessionist theology, even if this new teaching doesn't always make it to the level of the pews.⁵⁰ Circumcision remains a significant technology and symbol of Jewish ethnic identity, yet it is off-the-table for interfaith dialogue. Historically, Christianity maligned circumcision as a way of maligning the Jewish ethnicity and covenant with God that were represented by it, rather than to critique its harmfulness as a bodily practice. Is it possible for those who come from a Christian perspective today to vilify circumcision because of its health and human rights impacts, without vilifying Judaism?

Unfortunately, in the modern era, Christian theologians continued to rehash theological arguments against circumcision, with no interest in the human rights critique that arose against medical circumcision. According to Nina E. Livesey:

In the modern era, theologians and biblical exegetes continue to address circumcision in opposition to what they consider salvific. Circumcision represents an unacceptable lifestyle or religion, religion itself, or sense of exclusiveness. These evaluations emphasize, as did Luther's, the practitioner of circumcision over the rite itself. In addition, they are rooted in the fundamental dichotomy between a physical and metaphorical circumcision begun with Justin.⁵¹

When British and American Christians were beginning to embrace circumcision as a medical practice, German theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann and Ernst Kasemann continued to write about circumcision only in abstract and Pauline terms. Most modern biblical interpreters, staying

within the Bible and its polemical universe, have followed their lead. According to Livesey, the majority of Christians who write about circumcision continue to conceptualize it as a work of law that does not bring about salvation, as an indicator of achievement and boasting, a means of nationalistic distinction, and as a sign of an ineffectual religion or lifestyle.⁵² As we have seen, these are all anti-Jewish concepts.

On the other hand, there are growing numbers of Christian scholars who approach Jewish circumcision more neutrally, as a tool for understanding religious identity and a historical phenomenon that sheds light on early Christian identity and Christianity's outgrowth from Judaism. At least three of the scholars who have published on the role of circumcision in early Christian identity are members of various Christian denominations,⁵³ and Jewish scholars of religion have also done a great deal of work on this topic.⁵⁴ This body of research sheds light on the Jewish people's valuation of circumcision and explains Christianity's fraught attitude toward it. There are also two Christian theologians who have advanced this argument through their ethically and politically informed theologies about the sexuality of Jesus: Kwok Pui Lan and Graham Ward.

Kwok Pui Lan, an Asian postcolonial feminist theologian, has helped to illuminate the critical ethnic meanings of religious circumcision. Kwok details the history of sexist, homophobic, Western denigration of circumcision, in this case linked to the racist, bourgeois Christian anti-Semitism and persecution of Jews of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She explores the racist and colonialist assumptions that created silence and disavowal around Jesus's sexuality in the nineteenth-century scholarly "quest for the historical Jesus."⁵⁵ Kwok argues:

The flight from the historical Jesus might have been caused not only by his Jewishness, as [Susannah] Heschel has convincingly demonstrated, but also by anxiety with his masculine body. The Jewish sexed body of Jesus serves as an uneasy marker both of racial and ethnic difference and of the tension in the construction of masculinity and femininity. It would seem much safer and prudent to theologize about Jesus's inner religious consciousness as generic human [as the nineteenth-century scholars did] than to touch the volatile, unstable, and dangerous sexed body of a Jew. To borrow Freud's terminology, the anxiety of white men over their own sexuality and masculinity in maintaining purity and control of the bourgeois body had to be suppressed and sublimated in the universalistic representation of Christ. It is this universal Christ, abstract and separated from his particular Jewish context, who was proclaimed by missionaries and colonial officials as the savior of all peoples, at the name of whom every knee should bow. ... An asexual description of Jesus and his teaching justified the moral superiority of the European bourgeoisie and colonization.⁵⁶

Anti-Semitism has thus structured Christians' relationship to Jesus right up to the modern period, and Christian denigration of circumcision has influenced Christian views on Jesus's embodiment and sexuality, with worldwide consequences.

Graham Ward, a British postmodern academic theologian, has written two essays about the circumcision of Jesus that have been anthologized in numerous volumes.⁵⁷ To Ward, Jesus's circumcised state is significant in light of cultural politics and “the politics of embodiment.”⁵⁸ Ward argues that Luke portrays the infant Jesus as circumcised and a Jew because he is trying to make a subversive political statement about the value of marginalized Jewish bodies. The theology behind such a political statement on the part of Luke would be that the body of Christ is not meant to be a perfect body, symbolizing the Church as a perfect, dominant, beautiful society, but rather a low-status body meant to represent a community of low-status persons. Ward writes:

Politically I am struck by the rejection of the Jewish body in both the Graeco-Roman period and in Renaissance culture. This rejection gave rise in both periods to persecution and pogroms. ... In both cultures the circumcised body was a mutilated and wounded body; not the kind of body that could function as a microcosm of cosmic and political harmony [hence the way Jesus is portrayed as not having been circumcised in medieval art].⁵⁹

Based on this history, Ward conjectures, “Luke appears to be making a gesture of resistance to a cultural hegemony. The Christology outlined is one in which Christ is a counter-cultural figure: an ally of the poor, the sick, the destitute—all who are socially marginalized.”⁶⁰ Ward provides an important history of Roman and Christian denigration of Jewish circumcision in his analysis. The attention he gives to resisting anti-Semitism is crucial, and it is inspiring to think that resistance to anti-Semitism can be found in no lesser sources than the Gospel of Luke and the body of Christ.

However, from an intactivist perspective, it is tragic that a tool as violent as circumcision would be used in a righteous resistance struggle. Ward gives dangerous theological glorification to this violence in his discussion of the body of Christ, confusing the differences between circumcision as a stigmatized bodily status symbol and circumcision as bodily trauma. Ward writes:

Perhaps theology [today] is doing no more than reproducing the bodies that are culturally in fashion. But if so, then theology really has lost its critical way, and needs to return to the wounded and violated body of Christ: the body as always in some sense circumcised and in need of circumcision. ... The Church is a wounded body for the wounded; a body racked by the burden of a hope borne in a world of violations. Among the saints some have been martyred, and the Lamb on the throne in the Kingdom of God is a lamb that was slain.⁶¹

To say that the Church *always needs* “circumcision,” instead of saying what is *meant*, that the Church is always in need of a curtailment of its social status and privilege, is seriously dangerous in a world where children are circumcised because of their membership in a religious body. Because theological ideas about bodies affect and create the experiences of actual living bodies,

as Ward himself recognizes, it is important to be precise when using bodily categories to make theological points. Ward himself, in an earlier version of this essay, critiqued the silencing that happens when circumcision is treated as spiritual, allegorical, and theological rather than through the lens of the body-as-ethnic-and-cultural. But this same critique eerily points up his own silencing of the body-as-physical-and-experiential:

Put crudely, in the hermeneutical move towards moral disposition, soteriology, and eschatology, we are no longer talking about the handling and mutilation of sexual organs (and their implication in genealogy and ethnicity). Rather, we are talking about the preparation of the heart or soul for receiving the divine. We are not talking about the cutting of male flesh, pain or soreness and an ethnic boundary marking predicated upon bleeding; we are not talking about the disposal of unwanted body tissue—what does happen to all those foreskins anyway? We are not talking about gendered, ethnic bodies, what we do with them, what we write upon them, and how they are valued or demeaned. We are talking about the transcendent meaning of bodies, eschatological bodies, the resurrection of bodies on the eighth day. And this is not only hermeneutically reductive; it is ethically and theologically suspicious. For we lose embodiment this way: what I do, experience, and live out now in this racial context, as belonging to this sex and this ethnic grouping is read, transcendentally, from elsewhere, seen by the eye of God. And from elsewhere, from above, it loses its importance for me now—I who do these things. We are justifying something solely on the account of what it means in another time, in another place.⁶²

Tellingly, in the later versions of this essay, this pointed passage about the materiality of circumcision is toned down, its graphic imagery replaced by a lot more theoretical jargon, as well as fancy words in Greek and French!⁶³

Kwok and Ward do not engage in ethical reflection on contemporary circumcision as a medical controversy, human rights issue, or potentially violent bodily practice, but restrict their ethical reflection to critiquing the way circumcision was used as an excuse for theological violence in history. This is a typical approach among the small group of progressive Christian

scholars who address circumcision, either centrally or peripherally, in their various disciplines. Like Kwok and Ward, many discuss circumcision as a maligned cultural practice, a historical phenomenon that sheds light on early Christian identity, or as a metaphor for spiritual realities about bodies and embodiment. For example, the handful of feminist scholars in Christianity who discuss circumcision, do so because it is a way of talking about embodiment and gender in religious contexts. For them circumcision is a distracting fixation on the male body, created by patriarchy.⁶⁴ Even though the practice itself is what is being addressed, it is critiqued for its effect on society, rather than its effect on the person.⁶⁵

Some scholars have also drawn on biblical circumcision to create an analogy that sheds light on contemporary Christian identity, for example controversies about LGBT church members, people of color in a multicultural church, or Filipino Catholic migrants who return to their homeland.⁶⁶ Several scholars of Christianity even use circumcision merely as a metaphor for religious methodologies, hermeneutical (interpretive) moves, and theological practices.⁶⁷ In both these cases, talking about circumcision is just a way of talking about other things. Thus circumcision becomes a metaphor for another form of violence other than its own violence, in some cases minimizing the pain of it as an actual practice⁶⁸ and in other cases perpetuating a negative interpretation of it as a theological practice.⁶⁹ This common focus on symbolic meanings disables and distracts from critique of physical meanings, and recapitulates the long-standing Christian habit of turning concrete realities for analysis into disembodied allegories.

While the overall percentage of progressive Christian scholars today who mention circumcision in their work is low, it is encouraging that some Christians are finally talking about circumcision in a progressive, historically conscious way, not denigrating its meaning to

Judaism. These scholars thereby contribute to the broader systemic and cultural changes that are needed for circumcision to shift in the United States. However, they build absolutely no momentum for progressive social change around circumcision, mainly because they make no attempt to do so. Affecting the practice of circumcision itself is absent from their agenda. When circumcision is treated as merely as a historical or timeless phenomenon marshalled as a tool in a wide range of arguments, any impacts on the issue of contemporary circumcision will by definition be side-effects, sloppy and unexamined. Such side-effects are unintended and therefore innocent, but also lacking in positive intention. The widespread lack of understanding of circumcision harm in society, left undisturbed by these scholars, contributes to Jewish people's perception of anti-Semitism in contemporary discourse about circumcision. When progressive Christians who care about human rights talk about circumcision and don't mention any harms, then Christians coming from an intactivist perspective, who do allege circumcision harm, are suspected of having a regressive Christian distaste for all things Jewish.

The Christian groups that currently critique circumcision from an intactivist perspective, mostly from conservative Catholic and evangelical Christian backgrounds, can indeed be hostile to Judaism in their critiques of Jewish circumcision as a human rights issue. Unfortunately, many secular intactivist websites host and recommend Christian intactivist writings that use explicitly anti-Jewish arguments, and even label them as a “nonviolent” approach to circumcision.⁷⁰ Nonviolence means more than doing no harm to others, it also requires the realization of social justice. It is irresponsible for a third party to make use of divisive conflicts between Christians and Jews, in the hope of reaching Christian parents and drawing Christians into the movement.⁷¹

It is an ineffective way of persuading, motivating, or recruiting progressive Christians, who tend to recoil from literal, unscholarly uses of the Bible and language that denigrates other faiths.

The Christian intactivist groups who are trying to inspire Christians to forgo and oppose infant circumcision, deploy arguments that are deeply problematic in their attempt to strike at the heart of its religious appeal: that it appears in the Bible. They quote from New Testament texts such as the genuine and disputed letters of St. Paul, as well as the Acts of the Apostles, to say that the first Christians (inspired by the Holy Spirit) abolished circumcision for the people of God. Reading Paul's letters through the eyes of traditional Christian theology that privileges “faith” over “law,” they quote the Bible to say that Christians must not be circumcised or they will be spiritually inferior. They also argue that the God-given aspect of circumcision in the Hebrew Scriptures should not be considered, because the “old covenant” is abolished. An intactivist woman named Sophia summarizes the arguments against circumcision she has found in various religions, summarizing the so-called contemporary Christian argument with the following bullet-points on her website:

- “Christianity split off from Judaism because its followers did not see any value in the Old Testament requirement.
- Ironically, some Christians mistakenly believe circumcision is still required.
- Circumcision is against the Christian religion.
- Jesus was the last blood sacrifice.
- Jesus came to free the people of the Old Testament and welcome them into the New Testament.”⁷²

The closet-Christian intactivist Dr. Momma website even sells t-shirts in its Christian section that proudly proclaim the hoary adage of ancient Christian polemics: “BAPTISM not

circumcision.”⁷³ But what about Jesus himself being circumcised? Well, Jesus must have protested his own circumcision, because according to a Facebook group called Christians Against Circumcision, he was actually the first Christian intactivist!⁷⁴

In an attempt to mine the tradition for resources, Christian intactivist writing parrots the thousands of years of Christian teachings against circumcision, thereby perpetuating anti-Jewish prejudice. Such teachings include that the circumcision covenant is only for males and excludes women; Judaism's God is strict and punishing; circumcision is a prideful badge; Judaism is separatist rather than universal; Jesus brought a “new covenant” that changed the way the people of God are to relate with God; Paul was against ritual circumcision for all Christians; and the followers of Jesus were a monolithic group of believers that could be called “Christian” and were distinct from Jews.⁷⁵ A pamphlet called “Catholic Teachings on Circumcision,” produced by Catholics Against Circumcision and distributed by many intactivist groups, states proudly:

The Council of Vienna (1311) decreed that Christians should not be lured into Judaism or be circumcised for any reason. The following century, the Council of Florence ordered “all who glory in the name of Christian not to practice circumcision either before or after baptism, since whether or not they place their hope in it, it cannot possibly be observed without loss of eternal salvation.”⁷⁶

In other words, the idea is that Jews are going to hell. Religious supremacy by a culturally dominant group is profoundly immoral because it contradicts the divine commandment to love one's neighbor, and because it can lead to great violence. It is also strategically ineffective and counterproductive to the success of the intactivist movement.

Without explicitly embracing the value of Judaism, and also insisting that the multifaceted covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people remains intact and ongoing,

Christian intactivists cannot express the fear, disgust, and horror of forced genital surgery that is justified in the campaign to end circumcision, without coming across as Christians who are still afraid of and disgusted by Jews. When Christian intactivist writings quote sensationalist New Testament rhetoric out of context, such as Philippians 3:2 (“Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!”), as the Catholics Against Circumcision pamphlet does, it is no wonder that Jewish commentators like Silverman conclude, “The vituperation cast at Judaism by critics of medical circumcision [who use Christian discourse] often speaks to far more than a medical procedure. It suggests an enduring hatred and fear of the Jew.”⁷⁷ When people who uphold circumcision can attribute their opponents' motivations to prejudice or other social tensions, they can more easily deny the evidence of harm caused by circumcision.

In contrast with Jews, who often view discussions of circumcision in light of the historical religious identity conflicts between Christians and Jews, most Christians (who are not intactivists) do not look at circumcision through the lens of religion. For most Christians today, the concept of “Christian responsibility for circumcision” would simply refer to the responsibility of Christian parents to make the decision whether or not to medically circumcise their sons (as though this was rightly their decision, when it should actually be their grown son’s choice about his body). Christian parents in the United States tend to make the “circumcision decision” without recourse to the resources of the church, viewing it as a personal medical or social decision rather than anything connected to faith or morals. Christian intactivists have done some work to influence pastors, denominations, and religious hospitals, but at this time no American church has produced an ethical policy statement on male circumcision.⁷⁸

In the absence of clear church teaching, Christian intactivists are forced to appeal to parents' consciences, and to do so they use ethical reasoning from both secular and religious philosophies. Like all intactivists, they share scientific information about the harms and disputed benefits of circumcision, and also explain concepts in medical ethics such as consent and necessity, referring to what medical associations have themselves said about circumcision. They also seek to persuade using basic moral principles of gentleness and compassion, claiming these as Christian virtues. A pamphlet aimed at Christian parents, originally published in a southern Christian parenting magazine but distributed by many intactivist groups, urges the reader to fully evaluate any medical decision for their child "in light of your Christian obligation to love, protect, and nurture him. ... As Christians we are called upon to love, protect, and nurture our children."⁷⁹ This notion of Christian love may be gravely incomplete, as it focuses on self and family rather than neighbors and strangers, but still valid, especially in light of the lack of productive and beneficial love experienced by many children. (Although the pamphlet does not go there, more could be said theologically about a Christian love that sacrifices one's parental desire to determine the image of one's child in favor of another person's needs and unique existence.) Another compelling moral argument by this Christian intactivist writer is that Christians should consider the possibility of resisting mainstream "customs" of the dominant "American" culture, as "conformity is not a Christian value."

These gentle approaches are more effective than the strategy of quoting Paul's negative statements about gentile circumcision as though it were God's word against all circumcision. However, the strident arguments using biblical language may be necessary to reach Christians who are actually inclined to circumcise for religious reasons. Indeed, there is evidence that more

and more, North American Christians are thinking positively of circumcision not just in medical terms, but in terms of religion as well. Evangelical pastor and published intactivist Jim D. Bigelow hypothesizes a few theological reasons why many American Christians today perceive circumcision as a Judeo-Christian beneficial practice (though not ritual, per se): God wants us to live by God's word and keep all the commandments, never settling for less; Christ asks us to glory in going the extra mile and sacrifice in order to show dedication to God; God is all good, beneficent, and perfect, showering only blessings on God's people and never making sacrificial demands; and Jesus, as the example of all things good and right, was circumcised and should be imitated.⁸⁰ Countering this hazy perception requires evidence from the Bible and tradition.

Recently, some Christians are also seeing circumcision as a “freedom of religion” issue, not regarding the individual's freedom to engage or not with their family's religion, but their religion's freedom from government interference. When the 2011 San Francisco ballot measure to ban circumcision was questioned on freedom of religion grounds, many Christians saw protecting Jews from government regulation of the practice of their religion as an important protection for Christian churches as well.⁸¹ A columnist for *Christianity Today*, writing about the defeated circumcision ban, celebrated the role of medical circumcision in the United States in helping Christians overcome their prejudice against Jews based on this practice, improving the relationship between the faiths.⁸² An example of this rapprochement is the growing number of evangelical Christians giving birth at home who hire *mohels* (trained Jewish circumcisers) to perform a secular circumcision at home for their infant.⁸³ Conservative Christian pastors have also praised circumcision as a symbol that models right relationship with God, thereby indirectly supporting some of the meanings behind its practice.⁸⁴ A Presbyterian pastor even argued that

circumcision was a God-given challenge in our sex-crazed culture and a good reminder to Christians that our sexuality should be dedicated to God.⁸⁵

In light of this rapprochement, Christians who may be inclined to circumcise for medical or social reasons today, can more easily find Christian discourse that seems pro-circumcision. Compared to ancient Christians, Christians today have fewer anti-Jewish hang-ups to cast ambiguity into their hazy Bible-based perceptions that God invented circumcision in the Old Testament and Christians imitate Jesus who was circumcised. In such a situation, crafting a more responsible Christian intactivist interpretation of circumcision in scripture, tradition, and theology is more important than ever. But by repeating the faulty critiques of the past, existent Christian intactivist discourse contributes to the dynamics that hold the practice in place in the present. Christian intactivists' determined attempts to create social change in the practice of circumcision would benefit from better ways of speaking about circumcision. With the postcolonial and human rights frameworks that are available to Christian ethicists for the first time at this point in history, progressive Christians are well situated to create a new discourse about circumcision.

What *should* "Christian responsibility" mean in relation to circumcision? Christian responsibility should extend far beyond nuclear family and parental agency, into the responsibility that every Christian has to examine Christian discourses about circumcision, as well as our historical and contemporary complicity in anti-Jewish discourse. As progressive Christians repudiate Christian superiority toward other faiths and uproot anti-Judaism in our theology and the way we read the Bible, we are drawn away from an unbiblical vision of non-ethnic Christian universalism, toward embracing the value of ethnic and cultural particularities,

such as those symbolized by circumcision. Aware of history, a progressive Christian intactivism would refrain from deploying traditional Christian arguments against circumcision, because of their basis in anti-Judaism and a universalizing/homogenizing notion of Christian identity. A progressive Christian intactivist discourse would avoid Christian allegorizing, which values symbolic meanings more than the physical and social significance of practices. Instead it would challenge dualistic Christian rhetoric about faith versus law and spirit versus flesh. Progressive Christian intactivism would also confront Christian theology and doctrines that indirectly contribute to circumcision's perpetuation of a culture of violence and victimization, for example theologies of atonement that valorize the crucifixion of Jesus. Finally, progressive Christian intactivism would have to question the religious rituals that Christianity *has* embraced, for example the way that infant baptism is forced by parents onto non-consenting children.

If progressive Christians were to develop an intactivist perspective and take more responsibility for their tradition's complicity in circumcision, they would probably come to rely on liberative resources that embody the wisdom of the margins within Christianity, lifting these up in order to persuade other progressive Christians about intactivism. For example, sex-positive and body-positive Christian teachings from the field of body theology are resources for helping progressive Christians affirm the goodness of sexuality. Christians who affirm pleasure would then be more receptive to intactivist arguments about the value of the foreskin's pleasurable sexual functions. Likewise, Christian teachings from the fields of queer and feminist theologies would insist on genital autonomy and bodily self-determination for people of all ages and genders. Christians who are formed in this analysis would be able to limit their ethical support for genital surgery only to those forms of body modification (bodily marks of

religion/culture/ethnic identity/gender identity/aesthetics) that are freely chosen by consenting adults. Such ethical arguments, explicitly grounded in the resources of contemporary theologies, would be an effective, progressive Christian contribution to the intactivist cause. Combined with biblical arguments that are guided by modern biblical scholarship, these strategies would reach more moderate and progressive American Christians than conservative Christian intactivist groups currently do.

The time is ripe for a new, progressive Christian intactivism that would struggle to make constructive use of the Church's resources, while being appropriately wary of Christian tradition and its destructive history. This effort would take critical judgment and discernment. One of the most difficult tasks would be to connect modern ethical discourses of circumcision and human rights with the ancient scriptural resources of Christianity. Achieving this priority would require a more responsible approach to interpreting the Bible than is currently found in Christian intactivists' approach to scriptural texts on circumcision. It is to this task that I now turn.

THE SWORD OF DISCERNMENT

When I, as a progressive Christian and intactivist, turn to scripture to strengthen my critique of circumcision, I find I have to focus on Jewish circumcision, as secular medical circumcision is a modern practice not found in the Bible. Jewish circumcision is present in both the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible, and appropriately so, because the New Testament emerged from a Jewish sectarian religious movement that generally included gentiles, but had not yet separated from Judaism as Christianity would eventually do. However, this does not mean that Christians today are in a natural position to constructively critique the scriptures and ritual practices that are still sacred to the Jewish people, especially in consideration of the long history of Christian teachings of contempt about Judaism. Because the vast majority of Christians today are of gentile, not Jewish heritage, examining the New Testament for its stance on circumcision should be the priority. Although Jewish circumcision is discussed in many places throughout the New Testament, the place to focus is the gospel of Luke.

The second chapter of the gospel of Luke contains the only⁸⁶ concrete reference in Scripture to the circumcision of Jesus, which happens to him as a Jewish child. While other New Testament writers probably assume that Jesus was circumcised like all Jews, Luke is the only one to draw attention to it. The reference is contained in a single verse: “After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb” (Luke 2:21). For intactivists, this verse is where an exploration of circumcision in the New Testament properly focuses, as the circumcisions of John

the Baptist and Jesus in the gospel of Luke are the *only* places where involuntary, infant circumcision is narrated in the New Testament.

The letters of Paul, on the other hand, *only* oppose the circumcision of adult gentiles who might voluntarily choose it for religious reasons, *not* that of Jewish infants. Jewish infant circumcision is the type of circumcision mandated by the Torah, which, according to Paul, is still valid for all Jews, including Jewish Christians.⁸⁷ While adult proselyte (convert) circumcision was practiced in Judaism by the first century CE, it is not in Torah, and some scholars (notably Matthew Thiessen) indicate it may have been controversial to some Jews of the time, possibly including Paul. Whether or not this was part of Paul's multifaceted campaign against the circumcision of converts, so central to his school of thought, what matters is that he never explicitly opposes circumcision by ethnic Jews in his letters.

It is not necessarily the case that Paul downplayed adult circumcision as a strategic missionary move, in order to make conversion to Christianity easier for gentiles who did not want to be circumcised.⁸⁸ It may be that in resisting circumcision, Paul was doing something political in regards to the social status of the members of the Jesus movement in the eyes of the Roman authorities.⁸⁹ In his oft-repeated refrain in Galatians that “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything,” Paul seems not so much to be arguing for intactness, but rather resisting the way the practice determined people's religious or political status. He certainly was not resisting the practice itself through a critique of its health or human rights effects. In fact, to the Galatians he evinces callous disregard—whether humorous or cruel—for the bodily integrity of his opponents, fuming, “I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!” (Gal 5:12).

Rather than critiquing circumcision itself, or cynically trying to remove barriers to popularity, Paul was helping to determine the very character of the Jesus movement and its relationship to human diversity. Ultimately, he became a key player in the trend toward post-ethnic universalism in Christianity. By resisting circumcision for gentiles, Paul clung to the Jewish eschatological vision that gentiles would be drawn to the God of Israel *as gentiles*—in other words, keeping their own ethnic and cultural particularities, rather than seeking to be Jews by becoming part of the Jewish people through conversion and circumcision.⁹⁰ At the end of his career, he wrote to the community in Rome:

Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of gentiles also? Yes, of gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law. (Romans 3:29-31)

For Paul, “faith” provided a mechanism of covenant-belonging for gentiles. This faith, held first by Jews, was much more accessible to gentiles than was Hebrew “law,” which was still valid for Jews but not applicable to gentiles. A premier example of this law, or Scripturally-taught practice, was the requirement of circumcision on the eighth day (Leviticus 12:3), as well as the related practice of circumcision for adult converts. This is why Paul emphasized faith over law in his argumentation on Gentile circumcision, for example in the letter to the Galatians.

In light of this contemporary, mainstream reading of Paul's letters among liberal scholars, Paul is of limited use for a Christian critique of infant circumcision. The most that can be drawn from him is that gentile Christians should not be circumcised, but for religious rather than human rights reasons. Paul was talking about adult converts, while Christianity today is at least as much hereditary as a matter of conversion. Paul's position, that gentile converts should not choose to

have themselves circumcised, could be extrapolated to say that Christians today should not choose to circumcise their children for religious reasons. This argument could help change the behavior of those Americans who practice secular medical circumcision and identify as Christian (a large number of people), *and* are also the type of Christian who seeks to apply all of scripture literally to their lives (a somewhat smaller number). Perhaps those American Christians who find ancient and arcane religious controversies less personally relevant might be more responsive to an ethical discourse that illuminates human rights concerns somehow grounded in their scriptures. In addition, Paul's critique of gentile circumcision leaves out the concern that intactivists feel toward all infants who are subject to circumcision, regardless of identity.

However, many Christian intactivists do currently try to use Paul by citing his letters, and even broaden his argument to apply to Jews by repeating the traditional anti-Jewish interpretation of Paul that sees him as being against Torah—a view that moderate, liberal, and progressive bible scholars have repudiated in the last 30 years. Whichever of these approaches is emphasized, the unfortunate side effect of the current Christian intactivist argument (besides its dubious interpretation of its sources and its limited applicability, and despite its good intentions and the gains it has won), is a thoroughgoing religious supremacy. Any argument that gentile Christian practice is better than Jewish practice, or that Christian scripture is better than Jewish scripture (even for Jews!), perpetuates Jewish circumcision as a mark of ethnic and religious pride and survival, just as it has throughout a long history of similar arguments.

For progressive Christians who might seek to construct an intactivist identity, the narrative surrounding the circumcision of Jesus in the first two chapters of Luke is a much better resource than Paul's letters. Luke constructs an ethical identity for Mary of Nazareth by telling

her story of growing into her role as the mother of Jesus. Mary was not a victim of circumcision herself, but was a member of a culture that circumcised its infants. As a complicit witness to circumcision, or even a possible perpetrator, she was also a highly observant, potential ally who struggled to discern and assimilate challenging messages she received about her son. To live up to Mary's example of discipleship, progressive Christian intactivism would benefit from her epistemological skills of discernment and holding painful complexity, which she honed in her first years of motherhood.

The gentile author of Luke-Acts follows in the Pauline tradition and carries on Paul's limited critique of gentile circumcision and support of Jewish circumcision. This is evidenced in the story of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, where the leaders of the Jesus movement relinquish the commandment of circumcision only for adult gentiles. Circumcision for Jews (including Jewish infants) is not addressed by the Jerusalem Council, and furthermore it is supported in Acts 7, 16, and 21.⁹¹ Biblical scholar Matthew Thiessen summarizes, "Luke denies that circumcision [should function] as a rite of conversion; rather, he sees it as a custom only intended for and of value to Jews. ... Luke believes that Jewish believers should still practice circumcision on their newborn males, while gentile believers should not be circumcised."⁹²

In line with his overall interest in circumcision in Luke-Acts, Luke is the only gospel writer to narrate any instances of Jewish infant circumcision.⁹³ Scholars have struggled to explain the uniqueness of Luke's reference to Jesus's historically obvious circumcision, as well as the very Jewish flavor of Luke's infancy narrative compared to the rest of the gospel, especially since the whole thing was written for a gentile Christian audience. Thiessen suggests that perhaps "Luke stresses infant circumcision in order to distinguish between Jews and gentiles, covenantal

circumcision and noncovenantal circumcision [Thiessen's terms].”⁹⁴ Jervell argues that Luke's gospel was written at a time when Jewish Christianity had receded into the historical background and diminished socially, so that it needed to be defended as valid.⁹⁵ Because gentile Christians were exempt from circumcision and were the majority, Jewish circumcision (and other aspects of Torah) actually become in Luke a quaint, nostalgic, non-binding “past” to the Christian “present.” This “past” is nonetheless theologically important, because the savior Jesus had to be truly Jewish to bring the gentiles into saving relationship with the God of the Jews.

Graham Ward argues that the privileged gentile author of Luke was attempting to express solidarity with Jews, who were looked down on by Rome both for their ethnicity as a conquered, stereotyped people, and for their practice of circumcision, which was repugnant in dominant Greco-Roman culture. According to Ward, Luke's discourse of Jesus's circumcision is ethically engaged in that it commits Luke to a “politics of embodiment” in which the esteemed Jesus voluntarily takes on a shape that was socially despised.⁹⁶ Because the shape of Jesus's body is linked to the Christian movement, which was understood to be the body of Christ, this politics of embodiment means that the social body should accept all individual bodies in their diversity, and allow even a stigmatized body to represent the body politic or the divine body.

However, in evidence against Ward's interpretation, Luke did not encourage all other Christians to imitate Jesus in this act of solidarity. In fact, *not* becoming circumcised when joining this Jewish movement about Jesus may have been a more powerful act of solidarity, according to the historical-critical work of Brigitte Kahl and Davina Lopez on Paul's approach to circumcision. They suggest that it was an act of solidarity for gentiles *not* to be circumcised: to join with the Jewish people while remaining gentiles—two subject cultures illicitly

cooperating.⁹⁷ Likewise, the historical-critical work of Andrew Jacobs reveals the stereotypical, regulative meaning of circumcision in the Roman customs of “reading” subject cultures, a practice resisted by Jesus followers who did not become circumcised and by Luke, who portrayed the Jewish Jesus as circumcised and yet not regulated or constrained by the sign. Jacobs argues, “The author of the Gospel of Luke takes us further, placing that sign directly on Jesus' infant body; there it acts not merely as a sign of capitulation to Roman power, but as a mimicry of that power. Jesus circumcised sets his followers on the path to the annulment of this doubly Jewish-Roman system of signification.”⁹⁸

Regardless of the particular politics thought to be at play, Luke portrays circumcision as a religious and political practice only, not as a physical act with ethical implications for the person. For Luke it is indeed a positive practice in its narrative context, because of its positive religious and political significance for Jews. Luke 2:21 therefore celebrates ethnic and religious specificity and identity, rather than depicting a universal, unmarked Jesus or ethnically undifferentiated Christian movement. In this regard Graham Ward was on the right track. In contrast, gentile Christian interpreters after Luke, who were contemptuous of Judaism and more supersessionist in their theology than Paul or Luke, fretted that Jesus, who was supposed to be the universal Christian God, was not only Jewish but circumcised. Some theologians who preached or wrote on Luke 2:21 even speculated that Jesus as God only pretended to be a Jew, in order to convert Jews and end circumcision by replacing it with baptism.⁹⁹ However, Luke actually constructs a truly Jewish Jesus who identifies with marginalized ethnic practices, leading Christians to be on the side of those who are defending their cultures against stigma. Today this would prescribe respect for the significance of circumcision to Jewish identity in a world that is still plagued by

anti-Semitism. Since Christian contempt for Jewish circumcision has helped to elevate the practice's significance for Jews throughout history, perhaps Luke 2:21 can help shift this contempt among Christians away from a religious or ethnic basis. Thus progressive Christian intactivist engagement with scripture could help create the conditions for elective abandonment of this practice among American Jewish families via intra-cultural change.

While acknowledging the value of Jesus's circumcision as a defense of the goodness of Jewish identity under the gentile oppression of the Roman Empire, intactivists nonetheless insist that infant circumcision is always more than a religious or symbolic act. While Jesus's circumcision may have good symbolism about a just, multicultural politics, it is also a concrete, physical act with ethical consequences for the person of Jesus and impacts on his experience. Contrary to this truth, Luke 2:21 portrays the circumcision of Jesus in a matter-of-fact manner: “After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.” Indeed, the narrative itself does not acknowledge any violence happening in this verse; rather, it a casual, even understated mention, with more focus on the naming of Jesus.

There is therefore a disconnect between the intactivist urge to name this event in Scripture as a violent act, yet another example of biblical violence against children¹⁰⁰, and what the text indicates about its narrator's intention. But regardless of the fact that Luke does not acknowledge that the infant Jesus is suffering any violence, Christian intactivists see it and name it, and this is a legitimate reading strategy based on our commitments. Indeed, the Bible is full of many instances and kinds of violence that are not recognized as violent by the narrators, but may be named as such by contemporary people of faith. Perhaps Luke's simple statement of the fact

of Jesus's circumcision could offer a sense of companionship to modern men grieving the violence of foreskin amputation before the age of consent.¹⁰¹ A significant minority of men who were circumcised as infants report ongoing circumcision harm. This includes loss to one's sexual potential and personal sense of masculinity, the oppression of having been subjected to gender-based violence, and the painful feeling of having been violated in one's body and right to self-determination. As a woman who was not targeted for infant genital cutting because of gender in my society, I have an ally role to male infants who suffer circumcision pain and medical complications. As a feminist intactivist, I also embrace an ally role to the grown men who grieve their past circumcision and loss of bodily choice and function. In reading the first two chapters of Luke, I am therefore inclined to focus on the person of Jesus in Luke 2:21, because he is the victim and therefore his experience is the preferential locus for generating a liberative theological reading (the same could be said for John the Baptist who is circumcised in Luke 1:59).

However, focusing exclusively on Jesus in Luke 2 would have drawbacks for an effective intactivist appropriation of the story. Namely, the theological identity of Jesus in this story raises a problem. According to the traditional creedal Christian affirmation that Jesus equals God, Luke 1-2 is about the literal child of God, a belief that makes anything done to "the baby Jesus" especially sad and enraging. Unfortunately, an intactivist response that focuses on the specialness of Jesus as a victim of circumcision is not far from the traditional Christian response to Luke 2:21 that fueled violence toward the Jewish people, especially in medieval and Renaissance Europe. Art from that time portrays the notion that circumcision of Jesus, like the crucifixion, was an act of violence inflicted on God by a particular group of guilty people (the Jews).¹⁰² As

alleged torturers and killers of God and Christians, the Jews were subjected to paranoid and vengeful persecution at the hands of Christians who held these beliefs.

Such a reading of Luke 2:21 would be unethical, and would also sidestep the fact that under the traditional Jesus=God equation, the God of Genesis 17 and Leviticus 8 is actually circumcising Godself, and Jesus's role falls somewhere between an agent and a willing victim of sacrifice. Repudiating the violence of circumcision requires, as does the contemporary effort to undo violent interpretations of the crucifixion, an unlinking of Jesus from God's pre-existent power. Jesus is a divinely anointed human being who suffers by human hands in myriad ways, and God saves him and all human beings by choosing to be present with us as co-sufferer.¹⁰³ Jesus's crucifixion, much less his circumcision, was not a powerful sacrifice to end all sacrifice; this was God being weak, self-revealed to be unpowerful, if not powerless. In the theological identity constructed for Jesus in Luke-Acts, beginning with Luke 1-2, Jesus is not a pre-existent divine being incarnated, as we see in the gospel of John. Rather, he is a baby supernaturally inspired by the Holy Spirit from conception to grow up into a "divine man" figure, who will be closely guided by Spirit, give divine guidance, and act as God's agent to bring about a new spiritual kingdom in history.¹⁰⁴ Far from traditional Christian theology's view that God became a Jew to replace Judaism, God did not do anything at all to end circumcision; that is the job of those who are inspired by the Spirit to give guidance about circumcision's harms.

It has never been easy for Christians to explain why Jesus was so special, and progressive Christian intactivists would find themselves needing to explore christological possibilities beyond the limited and harmful orthodoxies that have perpetuated violence. For this exploration, the Mary of Luke 1-2, the first person who ever had to try to get to know Jesus, can be a guide.

Following a chapter on the annunciation (announcement) of Jesus's conception to Mary and the story of the birth of John the Baptist, Luke 2 describes the birth and childhood of Jesus. In Luke 1-2, Mary is a visibly Jewish character in a story that was written in such a way as to highlight continuity with traditional Jewish narratives. Scholars have recently been paying more attention to the overall Jewishness of Mary of Nazareth.¹⁰⁵ In Luke, Mary is not the significant theological person we think of her today. She is the mother of the person Jesus, not yet the mother of God, *per se*. Mary's Mother of God identity, or "theotokos" in Greek, was developed for her long after the biblical period, during the time when Jesus's theological identity as human and divine was being nailed down in creedal formulations and orthodox doctrine. In Luke, Mary is not yet the mother of God, nor the maternal face of God, nor the prime representative or patroness of the church, nor the exemplary model of perfect womanhood. She is simply an exemplary disciple and a human prophet.

Specifically, Luke portrays Mary as a prophet along the lines of Jewish tradition, uttering the magnificent Hebrew-scripture-based poem known as the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) in the presence of her cousin Elizabeth, whom she visits after hearing the angel's news. In these opening scenes, Mary is touched by the Holy Spirit and portrayed as obedient to the will of God, two attributes of a prophet. Luke's gospel stands out for never portraying the family of Jesus in a negative manner during Jesus's ministry. Mary's prophetic character in Luke 2 also fits in with the author of Luke-Acts's attitude toward Mary, or possibly a tradition about her that he received and passed on. Luke portrays her in Acts as present among the disciples after the death of Jesus, again being touched by the Holy Spirit, this time at the collective anointing of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2). Some scholars have conjectured that because Luke does not explicitly place

Mary at the foot of the cross during the crucifixion, as the gospel of John does, the fact that he brings her back in at the beginning of Acts indicates a historical, received tradition of Mary being an active member of the Jesus movement.¹⁰⁶ Another possibility is that Luke, in his narrative art, places Mary again right before an important birth, not of Jesus this time, but of the Christian movement through the Spirit. This interpretation of Mary's role in Acts suits Luke's theological purpose of demonstrating a faithful Jewish prehistory for the movement, and fits with Luke's epochal view of history (the anointing of the Spirit launching the third epoch, characterized by the kingdom of God being realized on earth through the Christian movement and the Church).¹⁰⁷

Mary's prophetic nature leads to cognitive dissonance for the Christian intactivist reader when she participates in Jesus's circumcision, right after Jesus's birth in Luke 2. Intactivists see that circumcising one's child is a harmful mistake, and it is hard to imagine a prophet as revered as Mary being capable of making a mistake. Yet biblical prophets in the Jewish scriptures are fully human characters whose actions are not necessarily above question. Luke 2:21 portrays Mary as obediently following through with the angel's instructions in naming the child Jesus: "After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb." For a Christian intactivist who considers circumcision to be incompatible with the nonviolence of God, it is hard to see Mary as following God's will in this case. However, she is obediently and faithfully following her community's traditions and scriptures. Circumcision on the eighth day was understood to be an act of obedience to the covenant between God and the Jewish people established in Genesis 17 and the law of Leviticus 8. Furthermore, in Luke's story, the birth of Jesus takes place during a

Roman imperial census. “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered” (Luke 2:1). Mary and Joseph are members of the Jewish people who are struggling to maintain their religion and culture under Roman rule, which stereotyped and demeaned circumcision as a sign of Jewish identity. In this and similar contexts of oppression faced by the Jewish people, circumcision is a way of claiming Jewish identity and particularity and passing it on to the next generation. While intactivists today rightly regret her decision to circumcise Jesus, Mary in her time is shown to be actively practicing her religion, negotiating the political circumstances around her, and defending and ensuring the continuation of her people's unique identity.

This portrait of Mary as a religious agent continues in the next scene, 32 days later, when Mary and Joseph go to the temple in Jerusalem along with their new baby. They go there to practice Luke's version of Jewish law relating to childbirth and the birth of one's first son. Luke links this scene to the preceding mention of the circumcision, in order to portray a Christian pre-history in which obedient, devout, and valid Jews are effective instruments of God's promises, and he places the latter rituals at the temple because of his interest in Jerusalem as the epicenter of the Jesus movement.¹⁰⁸ In this scene, celebrated by the Church as the Presentation of Jesus, Mary meets two other Jewish prophets who call into sharp relief the outlines of Mary's own prophetic vocation. First, Luke presents a righteous Jewish man named Simeon, who proclaims the Pauline/Lukan theological theme that Jesus is God's agent of salvation for the gentiles:

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the

parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” (Luke 2:25-32)

Upon hearing this proclamation of Jesus's vocation, “the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him” (Luke 2:33). Luke then continues with a prophesy that links Jesus's vocation to Mary's: “Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too’” (Luke 2:34-35). What is this piercing that Mary receives?

Christian theologians, from the third century to the twentieth, have sometimes linked these scenes in Luke, the circumcision of Jesus and the presentation of Jesus, because of a sense that they are both connected to sacrifice and the crucifixion. In an early example, Church father John of Damascus wrote in *Orthodox Faith*, “This blessed one [Mary], who had been found worthy of gifts surpassing nature [aka a virgin and painless birth] did at the time of the passion suffer the pangs which she had escaped at childbirth. When she saw him put to death as a criminal—the man she knew to be God when she gave birth to him—her heart was torn from maternal compassion and she was rent by her thoughts as by a sword. This is the meaning of ‘and a sword shall pierce through your own soul.’”¹⁰⁹ This interpretation links the presentation to the circumcision, because many theologians of the Church (Ambrose, Augustine, and others) saw circumcision as also a foreshadowing of the crucifixion, and indeed a first step of it—a “down-payment” of Christ's saving blood.¹¹⁰ However, it is unlikely that Luke intended to link his

presentation scene to the crucifixion through Simeon's prophecy of Mary's suffering, as he does not place Mary at the foot of the cross to suffer there with Jesus. Unlike the later gospel of John, Luke and his community did not seem to think that Mary was present at the crucifixion.

In a contemporary example linking the circumcision to the presentation, theologian Graham Ward wrote in his reflections on the circumcision of Jesus:

The circumcision links salvation to naming, weaving a complex relation between Mary's body and Christ's. For the cutting Jesus undergoes Mary herself will undergo when 'a sword will pierce through your soul also.' The present event of circumcision dissolves into the future prophecy while it floats upon a past resonant with connotations of shepherd kings and sacrificial lambs. Time is being governed; an explicit sense of providence is performed through certain symmetries: John [the Baptist] and Jesus, Mary and Jesus. The brief action takes on a symbolic weight, a diaphanous quality—as if when held up to the sunlight of eternal truth that watermark of what has been and what will come permeates the present significance of the act.¹¹¹

However, Ward does not give any textual argument that Luke is referring back to the circumcision with Simeon's enigmatic statement, or using this enigmatic statement to retrospectively invest theological meaning into the circumcision that just happened. Even as Ward critiques the allegorizing of the circumcision by the church fathers, he himself downplays the damaging physicality of circumcision by saying that Mary's heart is “cut” also. Ward's interpretation of the phrase addressed to Mary also does not fit in with its context, Simeon's prophecy about Jesus right after he calls him “a light to the gentiles”: “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” Luke is likely referring to the fall of those Jews who “oppose” the Jesus movement, versus the rise of those

Jews who establish and join the movement, or even the rising of gentile followers of Jesus to the status of honorary Israelites or theological Israel, as Paul would say.

If this is the case, then Luke portrays the adult Jesus as a divisive sign for humanity, and the sword that pierces Mary is an inner division—not knowing what to believe about Jesus, and perhaps fearing being judged or condemned for wrong beliefs and decisions. Elizabeth Johnson, drawing on work by Raymond Brown, Barbara Reid, and Kathleen Norris, suggests that the sword is “the sword of discernment,” referring to Ezekiel 14:17, in which the people experience a divine “sword of judgment” that discriminates between idolaters and the faithful.¹¹² Mary has to struggle to understand the word of God and obtain the clarity that God has about people, and the process troubles her. In the scene of the presentation, Luke implicitly contrasts Mary’s role as a prophet with that of another female prophet, Anna, after Mary receives Simeon’s prophecy:

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:36-38)

Mary is not ready, as Anna is, to settle on one clear redemptive meaning about Jesus and proclaim it loudly to all. But it is a sign of faithful growth that Mary struggles to interpret what she hears, rather than passively accepting testimony at face value. She seems to be holding God’s revelations up to the light of her own experience and plumbing them for deeper meaning.

Indeed, Luke 1 and 2 show Mary to be troubled and pondering in her heart multiple times: after receiving prophecy from the angel Gabriel, the shepherds at the birth, and from

Simeon. When Gabriel greets her as “favored one,” Mary “was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be” (Luke 1:29). Luke says about the shepherds: “When they saw [the child in the manger], they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2:17-19). She even receives a troubling claim about her son and God from the child Jesus himself. At the end of Luke chapter 2, when Mary and Joseph lose the 12-year-old Jesus and find him at the temple, Jesus says that he is at his Father's house. Luke frankly points out their incomprehension: “But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:50-51). The Greek word for “treasure” means keep—she kept and preserved these mysterious sayings in her troubled heart because she did not understand them, and needed to keep thinking about them later. With this view of Mary, it is understandable that she is not involved in Jesus's ministry, to the point of being absent at the crucifixion—she didn't understand who he was until after the resurrection. At that point, in the Acts of the Apostles, she moves from being a prophet to also being a disciple.

In Luke, it is possible to be a prophet who does not entirely get it. In fact, such a prophet becomes a disciple who models for all Christian disciples that they are human, and therefore have to struggle to interpret God's word. This way of conceptualizing the interaction between a person and the Holy Spirit is immanent (“God right here”), but not so determinate and directive that God's word is allowed to literally be carved into a person's flesh. Mary is a faithful disciple who doesn't always get it right, and a prophetic member of a prophetic tradition—both of which are capable of misunderstanding God's will. This is a more believable portrait than John of

Damascus's claim that Mary was a supernatural female who felt no pain during childbirth, and whose heart was imbued with supernatural knowledge that her child was God, without any need to struggle to understand. In fact, not only does Luke's Mary not own the secret of her child's identity, she doesn't even own her child—his name is not of her choice or from her family, but chosen by God (emphasized in Luke's account of the circumcision, when he is named Jesus as given by the angel before conception); and despite his obedience as a child, he belongs not to her house, but to his Father's house (the capstone of Luke's infancy narrative). In a world where children are owned by parents and can be modified for aesthetic or genealogical reasons, Luke provides the model of a divine parent-child relationship.

In searching Luke 1 and 2 for a model of ethical identity that is relevant to contemporary intactivist commitment, I have focused on Mary's agency. Mary is not alone in being responsible for Jesus's circumcision, since a Jewish woman would not likely have been the one to perform it, and Joseph and the whole community must have supported it. But Mary is no helpless onlooker; Luke portrays Mary and Joseph as parents acting in tandem from Jesus's birth on.¹¹³ Likewise, Elizabeth and Zechariah—both of whom are filled with the Holy Spirit on occasion—are also portrayed as a traditional Jewish couple who circumcises their son, John the Baptist. From a 21st century perspective, Mary is exercising the power she and Joseph have as parents to invade and modify their son's body, while Jesus in Luke 2:21 has absolutely no agency or power, being a helpless infant. While many contemporary parents, especially mothers, who have circumcised their sons have spoken up about being haunted with regrets, Mary in Luke reveals no conflict or remorse; that would have been anachronistic to her time and situation. However, as a circumcising parent, Mary is a relevant and realistic female character for our times. Women

today perpetuate infant circumcision by downplaying its harms (not being the target of it themselves), rejecting any comparisons with female genital mutilation, and by choosing to circumcise their sons. Mary's story should cause modern women to ponder the harms we are complicit in and the agency we do have despite structures of oppression.

At the same time, intactivist women can appropriate Mary as a role model for our times. She is not the mythical perfect mother who never makes mistakes, and therefore she provides a model of agency for women that is more complex and human than the idealized mother/nurturer who is expected to carry all the virtues of a society and always do right by others, through instinct and obligation. As one who carries the sword of discernment in her heart, she is committed to pondering and discerning revisions to her beliefs, culture, and traditions, even at the cost of personal pain. Mary's struggle was in the realm of understanding who her child was in the context of her Jewish faith. She did not struggle over a "circumcision decision," as discourse about the physical harm of circumcision was not present in her time. However, for parents today who have access to evidence and testimony about circumcision harm, Mary models how to be a person who does not reject information that is new, confusing, and challenging, but ponders it seriously. Like Mary, Jewish and Christian parents today also have to consider who their children are and what their lives mean as our faith traditions change. While Jesus represents the broken heart of those who regret having been circumcised against their will, whose testimony the world ignores or finds divisive—according to Simeon, "a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed," Mary can represent the broken heart embraced by those who confront circumcision pain and their own complicity in it.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A HEARTFELT GENTILE CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

As more progressive Christians come to oppose circumcision and find the courage to dive into the contradictions of Christian heritage, sword of judgment in hand, they may rediscover their spiritual siblinghood with Judaism, especially through the lives of Mary, Jesus, and the work of contemporary Jewish intactivists. They may also come to reflect on their stereotypes about Jewish identity, as well as their own Christian identity as gentile descendants of an originally Jewish movement. As Christian intactivists increasingly recognize that the efforts of Jews to change Jewish circumcision traditions are primary, both strategically and ethically, and that Jewish intactivists do this in harmony with their own community, not in enmity to it, then Christians will also be obliged to increasingly recognize Jesus as a Jew who pursued similar insider activism. The earliest Jesus movement was a *Jewish* emancipatory effort,¹¹⁴ as Jewish intactivism is today. Effectively supporting Jewish intactivists' efforts to rework aspects of their tradition from within would require greater respect for Judaism than currently exists within gentile intactivism.¹¹⁵ Critiquing a culture from the outside is different from, and may be incompatible or detrimental to, the efforts of those making critiques on the inside.

In light of this analysis, the way in which Christian intactivists so far have tried to put circumcision on the agenda of Christian parents and churches has been counterproductive. Steeped in St. Paul's revolutionary words, they boldly call upon American Christians to forgo circumcision, and cling instead to a gentile Christian identity that has no need of religious, ritual circumcision. They harangue those who benefit from US empire to renounce and recover from

their cooperation with contemporary idols of American aesthetics and identity, which promote medical circumcision. But unlike St. Paul, they overlook God's call for ancient gentiles, who were not circumcised, to unite in loving, subversive horizontal solidarity with ethnic Jews, who were. According to some recent interdisciplinary readings of Paul's letters, this inter-ethnic solidarity was the key genius of the Jesus movement under Roman imperial logics of divide and conquer.¹¹⁶ To live up to the biblical identity of gentile Christians, in heartfelt solidarity with people who are oppressed under empire, would therefore be a costly process of renouncing Christian privilege, proprietary theology, religious supremacy, and the imperial legacy of Christian civilization.

What does this mean for a progressive Christian ethical critique of circumcision? It means parting ways with secular intactivists and conservative Christian intactivists alike, setting aside the ethical approach that would base itself on universal judgments and homogenous ideals regarding circumcision. This would free progressive Christian intactivism to focus critique within, to criticize secular medical circumcision and the role of Christianity in perpetuating Jewish circumcision, without having to criticize Jewish practices from its dominant outsider position. More transformative than crafting an ethical stance on all circumcision everywhere, the task is to develop an ethical identity by engaging the ever-developing flux of history and personal stories. Gentile Christians can become the kind of people who engage the complexity of contemporary practices of circumcision in ever more responsive and responsible ways, by growing in the capacity to relate to myriad forms of suffering with a discerning heart.

REFERENCES

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- 1 A pioneer of the field of “body theology,” Nelson's work includes *Embodiment* (1978), *Between Two Gardens* (1983, reissued in 2008), *Body Theology* (1992), and a seminal 1990s anthology called *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*.
 - 2 James B. Nelson, *The Intimate Connection: Male Sexuality, Masculine Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 12.
 - 3 *Ibid* 89.
 - 4 For example, feminist theologian Christine Gudorf's radical framework for sexual ethics makes an argument against FGM, but not against male genital mutilation (MGM) (circumcision). She condemns FGM on the grounds that it disables women from enjoying sex while allowing more pleasure to males, using the principle of mutuality in sexual pleasure as normative. Unquestioningly assuming male privilege in everything, she argues that male circumcision rarely reduces male pleasure and sexual function, and even when doing so (in the case of tribal subincision) that is a side-effect, not the purpose. This is a frustrating missed opportunity to locate circumcision correctly within the excellent ethical principles she sets out, as circumcision does reduce male pleasure as well as the pleasure of his partners (if female), thereby reducing mutuality of pleasure. Christine E. Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 145.
 - 5 Matthew A. Taylor, personal communication, April 8, 2014.
 - 6 The contemporary circumcision procedure, in both secular medical and Jewish ritual settings, is a lengthy and highly invasive procedure that is widely acknowledged to cause pain and shock to the infant, even in instances when local anesthesia is used. Rather than a simple snip of skin, it involves peeling, crushing, and cutting highly sensitive flesh. Serious medical complications continue to arise in a small number of cases in the United States every year. While the amputation of healthy tissue is not inherently bad, the fact that it is done to people who cannot give consent, and that its preventative health benefits (including the current focus on HIV) are disputed, raises cause for concern. In addition, the non-diseased flesh being amputated, the foreskin, has significant sexual functions, including protection of the glans, lubrication and elasticity, and the provision of a great proportion of the nerve endings that exist in an intact penis.
 - 7 The exception being Messianic Jews, an evangelical Christian movement that aims to follow Torah. However, Bigelow estimates that most circumcisions performed in America for religious reasons are actually in evangelical Christian families. I suppose that it because Jewish and Muslim populations in the U.S. are smaller even than the minority of Christians who circumcise for religious reasons (as opposed to the large number who are Christian and circumcise for secular reasons). Jim D. Bigelow, “Evangelical Christianity and Its Relationship to Infant Male Circumcision,” in *Male and Female Circumcision: Medical, Legal, and Ethical Considerations in Pediatric Practice*, edited by Denniston, George C., Frederick Mansfield Hodges, and Marilyn Fayre Milos, 173-178 (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 1999), 173.
 - 8 Muslim intactivism does exist, and an exploration of Christian and American historical and contemporary discursive participation in Islamic circumcision would be a worthy future project.
 - 9 These groups include Christians for Wholeness (Acts 15, an Outreach of Galatians 5), Christians Against Circumcision, the Whole Christian Network, Christians Must Not Circumcise, and Catholics Against Circumcision, all of which seem to be mainly based on the web and Facebook. They also link to individual blog postings on circumcision by other Christian bloggers. At least one of these groups claims to be ecumenical;

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- Christians for Wholeness writes, “The *Acts 15* website is produced by an informal network of Christians from all sides of the church. Our denominations, stories, and theological details vary widely, but our common concern is informing Christian parents about the realities of the circumcision decision. We include lay people and clergy; male and female; Catholic & Protestant; Orthodox, fundamentalist, evangelical, and liberal; American, Canadian, and more!” However, neither this group nor any of the others seem to have any visible members or representative writings from mainline Protestant denominations, progressive Anabaptist groups, or progressive Catholic groups in the United States. <http://acts15.net/>. Accessed December 17, 2013.
- 10 Jennifer Wright Knust, “Circumcision, Semen, and the Products of a Woman's Womb,” in *Unprotected Texts: the Bible's Surprising Contradictions About Sex and Desire* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 217.
 - 11 Hope Reeves, “Circumcision Rates in U.S. Drop Drastically in Western States,” *The New York Times*, August 22, 2013. <http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/08/22/circumcision-rates-in-u-s-drop-dramatically-in-western-states/?_r=0>. Accessed March 18, 2014.
 - 12 Dolores T. Puterbaugh, “Has religion dropped a notch below S&M?” *USA Today (Magazine)*, Nov. 11, 2011.
 - 13 Translations of the Hebrew Bible are from the Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation, second edition. Translations of the Greek Bible (New Testament) are from the New Revised Standard Version.
 - 14 See especially Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, “The Fruitful Cut: Circumcision and Israel's Symbolic Language of Fertility, Descent, and Gender,” in *The Savage in Judaism*, 141-76, Indiana University Press: 1990; as well as Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
 - 15 See Eric Kline Silverman, *From Abraham to America: a History of Jewish Circumcision* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).
 - 16 Andrew S. Jacobs in *Christ Circumcised* argues that circumcision was a key aspect not only of Jewish resistance to assimilation into the Roman Empire, but also a key way that the Roman Empire stereotyped and regulated the Jews. Andrew S. Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised: a Study in Early Christian History and Difference* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).
 - 17 “According to the decree, they put to death the women who had their children circumcised, and their families and those who circumcised them; and they hung the infants from their mothers’ necks.” (1 Maccabees 1:60-61)
 - 18 Robert G. Hall, “Epispasm: Circumcision in Reverse,” *Bible Review* (August 1992): 52–57.
 - 19 Philo wrote a treatise called *De Circumcisione* in the first century BCE, discussed in most scholarly monographs on Jewish circumcision.
 - 20 At the time the Galatians received their letter from Paul, adult proselyte circumcision was apparently an active controversy there, with competing missionaries or assembly leaders (possibly themselves gentiles) encouraging the gentiles of the sect to become circumcised. Galatians is likely one of the earliest Pauline letters, and in it Paul refers to an earlier controversy about circumcision that had taken place between him and Peter.
 - 21 There are many interpretations and arguments about Paul's intent regarding circumcision in Galatians and Romans. Recent work includes Davina Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Susan Elliot, *Cutting Too Close for Comfort: Paul's Letter to the Galatians In Its Anatolian Cultic Context* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2003).
 - 22 In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote, “Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the

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- requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God. Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much, in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.” (Romans 2:25-3:2)
- 23 In his letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote, “I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh—circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.” (Philippians 3:3-7)
 - 24 In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, “Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything. Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called.” (1 Corinthians 7:18-20)
 - 25 This last is not attested to by Paul himself, but rather is an act attributed to Paul in the later text Luke-Acts (Acts 16:3).
 - 26 Christian intactivists tend to make this change seem greater than it was. To address the Christian belief in the beneficial intent of God's commands (including in the Old Testament), they allege that the kind of circumcision God ordained was just a drawing of a few drops of blood, not actual removal of the foreskin.
 - 27 For detailed discussions of these Patristic writings, see Andrew S. Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised*.
 - 28 Origin, *On First Principles*, IV, 3, 3, p. 293, quoted in Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
 - 29 See Jeremiah 4:4 (heart) and 6:10 (uncircumcised ears) and Ezekiel 44:6-9, as well as Exodus 6:30 (uncircumcised lips), and Deuteronomy 10:16 and 30:6.
 - 30 Graham Ward, “On the Politics of Embodiment and the Mystery of All Flesh,” in *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God, and Politics*, edited by Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (New York, London: T&T Clark, 2004), 78.
 - 31 This type of theology is also called “supersessionism,” and a number of Christian denominations have begun to try to move away from it, for example the Roman Catholic Church which declared in the 1960s during the second Vatican council that the “old covenant” still holds.
 - 32 Centuries later, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther and others continued this kind of theological anti-Judaism, also bringing circumcision up in their discussions of Jewish inferiority. Aquinas wrote that Jesus's circumcision took “away from the Jews and excuse for not receiving Him” (*Summa Theologica*, 3, Question 37). Luther, in an essay called “On the Jews and Their Lies,” wrote: “[The Jews] brazenly strut before God, lie and boast about being God's only people by reason of their physical circumcision, unmindful of the circumcision of the heart. ... Subsequently, after they have scourged, crucified, spat upon, blasphemed, and cursed God in his word, as Isaiah 8 prophesies, they pretentiously trot out their circumcision and other vain, blasphemous, invented, and meaningless works” (1543).
 - 33 Some of the Christian writing we have on circumcision comes from homilies preached for that feast day, which tended to attribute the significance of the “eighth day” of Jesus's circumcision to the “eighth day” of Jesus's resurrection (on Easter Sunday, the day after the Sabbath or seventh day).

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- 34 Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Graham Ward, "On the Politics of Embodiment and the Mystery of All Flesh," in *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God, and Politics*, edited by Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (New York, London: T&T Clark, 2004); and Kwok Pui-Lan, "Touching the Taboo: On the Sexuality of Jesus," in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, edited by Marvin M. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas, 119-34, 2nd ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).
 - 35 Henry Abramson and Carrie Hannon, "Depicting the Ambiguous Wound: Circumcision in Medieval Art," in *The Covenant of Circumcision: New Perspectives on an Ancient Jewish Rite*, edited by Elizabeth Wyner Mark (Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press, published by University Press of New England, 2003).
 - 36 See Shaye D. Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Leonard B. Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
 - 37 Two excellent histories of this era include Robert Darby, *A Surgical Temptation: The Demonization of the Foreskin and the Rise of Circumcision in Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and David Gollaher, *Circumcision: a History of the World's Most Controversial Surgery* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).
 - 38 The most famous anti-masturbation crusader was J.H. Kellogg, the breakfast cereal tycoon. He wrote, "A remedy [for masturbation] which is almost always successful in small boys is circumcision. The operation should be performed by a surgeon without administering an anesthetic, as the pain attending the operation will have a salutary effect upon the mind, especially if it be connected with the idea of punishment." John Harvey Kellogg, *Treatment for Self-Abuse and Its Effects, Plain Facts for Old and Young* (Burlington, Iowa: P. Segner & Co. 1888), 295.
 - 39 Michael S. Kimmel, *The Gender of Desire: Essays on Male Sexuality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005) and *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
 - 40 R. W. Cockshut, "Circumcision," *British Medical Journal*, vol. 2 (1935): 764.
 - 41 Steven Lapidus, "Bottoming for the Queen: Queering the Jews in Protestant Europe at the *Fin du Siecle*," in *Jewish/Christian/Queer: Crossroads and Identities*, edited by Frederick Roden, 105-126 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009).
 - 42 Leonard B. Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
 - 43 M. J. Moses, "The Value of Circumcision as a Hygienic and Therapeutic Measure," *New York Medical Journal*, vol. 14 (1871): 368-374.
 - 44 Leonard B. Glick, *Marked In Your Flesh*.
 - 45 Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*.
 - 46 It is commonly held, however, that birth to a Jewish mother alone suffices to establish full Jewish status.
 - 47 Michael S. Kimmel, "The Kindest Un-Cut: Feminism, Judaism, and My Son's Foreskin," *Tikkun*, 16(3), May/June 2001.
 - 48 Harry Brod, "Circumcision and the Erection of Patriarchy," in *Men and Masculinities in Christianity and Judaism: A Critical Reader*, edited by Bjorn Krondorfer (London: SCM Press, 2009). Forster had said, "If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I would have the guts to betray my country."

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- 49 Rabbi Elyse Wechterman, "A Plea for Inclusion," in Elizabeth Wyner Mark, ed, *The Covenant of Circumcision: New Perspectives on an Ancient Jewish Rite*.
- 50 Edward Kessler, *Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Encounter* (London: SCM Press, 2013), 178.
- 51 Nina E. Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010, 143-144.
- 52 *Ibid* 146-149.
- 53 Matthew Thiessen (Mennonite), Jennifer Wright Knust (American Baptist), and Nina Livesey (Lutheran). The works I am referring to are Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jennifer Wright Knust, "Circumcision, Semen, and the Products of a Woman's Womb," in *Unprotected Texts: the Bible's Surprising Contradictions About Sex and Desire* (New York: HarperOne, 2011); and Nina E. Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010.
- 54 Historical accounts of circumcision by Jewish scholars include Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Leonard B. Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Elizabeth Wyner Mark, ed, *The Covenant of Circumcision: New Perspectives on an Ancient Jewish Rite* (Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press, published by University Press of New England, 2003); and Eric Kline Silverman, *From Abraham to America: a History of Jewish Circumcision* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).
- 55 Kwok Pui Lan, "Touching the Taboo: On the Sexuality of Jesus," 124, 126-127. Kwok's discussion of circumcision draws on the research of Sander L. Gilman, *Freud, Race, and Gender* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).
- 56 *Ibid* 127.
- 57 The essay I analyze is Graham Ward, "The Politics of Christ's Circumcision and the Mystery of All Flesh," *Christ and Culture: Challenges in Contemporary Theology*, 159-179, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005), which appeared in two other anthologies. In a different essay that has itself appeared in three volumes, Ward counts Jesus's circumcision as the first of many events in his life story (transfiguration, resurrection, ascension, etc.) that demonstrate that his body begins as a specifically male Jewish body but is gradually displaced into more and more inclusive symbolic and spiritual realities that eventually include us all as the body of Christ. He draws out the Church's allegorical readings of Christ's circumcision (as symbolizing the crucifixion or the generalized resurrected body of the "eighth-day" end of the age) to demonstrate that the materiality of Christ's body was symbolically and spiritually loaded from the start. He also points out that Jesus's incarnation is displaced from regular human incarnation/creation because he was born without original sin (pre-fall) in a post-fall world and only has one human parent, and circumcision is linked to that because it demonstrated the literalism of Jesus's incarnation to the medieval Church. Leaving circumcision in symbolic territory in order to advance his argument that the materiality of Jesus's gendered body does not define his identity, Ward maintains, uses, and esteems a theological displacement which itself displaces any useful discussion of circumcision as a real practice. Graham Ward, "The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ," in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999). Versions of this essay also appear in Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000) and *Men and Masculinities in Christianity and Judaism: A Critical Reader*, edited by Bjorn Krondorfer.
- 58 "On the Politics of Embodiment and the Mystery of All Flesh," in *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God, and Politics*, edited by Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (New York, London: T&T Clark, 2004).79.

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- 59 *Ibid* 81.
- 60 *Ibid* 82.
- 61 Graham Ward, "The Politics of Christ's Circumcision and the Mystery of All Flesh," *Christ and Culture: Challenges in Contemporary Theology*, 159-179, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005), 180.
- 62 Graham Ward, "Uncovering the Corona: A Theology of Circumcision," in *The Birth of Jesus: Biblical and Theological Reflections*, edited by George J. Brooke (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2001), 40.
- 63 In the later version, Ward wrote, "By wheeling in the allegorical interpretations of the Philo, the Origen, and the Gregory the Greats, we are weighting the episode down with symbolic suggestiveness. In other words, we are legitimating its significance by an appeal to the way it encodes transhistorical and eternal verities. To employ good Hellenistic vocabulary, we are translating *historia* into *theoria*. By this move we both transfigure the material—which has been made to render its true form—and displace the act itself. The body begins to disappear, so that in hermeneutical shift towards moral dispositions, soteriology and eschatology we are no longer talking about the handling and the mutilation of sexual organs. We are treating the preparation of the heart or soul for receiving the divine. We are not talking about the cutting of male flesh, an incision into masculinity itself. In this theologizing we both bypass the way circumcision is a political act implicated in issues of gender, genealogy, and ethnicity and we bypass the metaphors of the theological discourse that has transfigured the event. For concerns with the production of moral dispositions, moral subjects, soteriological models of redemption that revolve around an exchange mechanism between two asymmetrical powers, and eschatological dreams of new forms of embodiment, new liberational *jouissances*, are both freighted with political implications." *The Sexual Theologian*, 79.
- 64 See for example, Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza quoted in Luise Schottroff, "Law Free Gentile Christianity—What About the Women? Feminist Analysis and Alternatives," in *A Feminist Companion to Paul*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2004); Tatha Wiley, *Paul and the Gentile Women: Reframing Galatians* (New York: Continuum, 2005); and Joseph Marchal, "Bodies Bound for Circumcision and Baptism: An Intersex Critique and the Interpretation of Galatians," *Theology & Sexuality* 16.2 (2010): 163-182.
- 65 Jewish writings on circumcision are more likely to discuss circumcision as a physical practice on infants, perhaps because they are more accustomed to examining circumcision in light of the ethical tradition of Judaism. Even Jewish scholarship which focuses on the historical or social effects of circumcision rather than circumcision itself will often pause to consider the effects on the person.
- 66 See Thomas Bohache, "To Cut or Not to Cut: Is Compulsory Heterosexuality a Prerequisite for Christianity?" in *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, edited by Mona West and Robert E. Goss (Pilgrim Press, 2000), 235; Patrick S. Cheng, "Galatians," in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, 624-29, edited by Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006); Karen Hernández-Granzen, "Multiculturalism or Cultural Circumcision?" in *Renewing the Vision* (Louisville, Ky: Geneva Press, 2000), 201-211; and Athena Gorospe, *Narrative and Identity: an Ethical Reading of Exodus 4* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007).
- 67 See Kathleen Biddick, *The Typological Imaginary: Circumcision, Technology, History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Hugh S. Pyper, "Fleshing Out the Text," in *Sanctified Aggression: Legacies of Biblical and Post-biblical Vocabularies of Violence*, edited by Jonekka Bekkenkamp and Yvonne Sherwood, 44-59 (London: T&T Clark International, 2003); and Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Mutilations and Restorations," in *Controversies in Body Theology*, edited by Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (London: SCM Press, 2008).
- 68 For example Hugh S. Pyper, "Fleshing Out the Text," in *Sanctified Aggression: Legacies of Biblical and Post-*

biblical Vocabularies of Violence, edited by Jonekke Bekkenkamp and Yvonne Sherwood, 44-59, London: T&T Clark International, 2003.

- 69 Bohache and Cheng both interpret Paul's rejection of Gentile circumcision as a repudiation of legalistic requirements for people of faith. However, according to the New Perspective on Paul, the teaching for gentiles not to become circumcised was not a breaking of Jewish law.
- 70 For example, Laura Jezeck's offensively anti-Judaic essay is labeled "nonviolent." Laura Jezeck, "What the Bible Really Says about Routine Infant Circumcision," <http://www.stopcirc.com/christian.html>. Accessed December 17, 2013. Another anti-Judaic and even anti-Semitic essay written by a Christian is posted on the secular Circumcision Information and Resource Project website. Van Lewis, "Circumcision and Christianity: A Call to Christian Action," July 2000, cirp.org/pages/cultural/lewis1. Accessed December 17, 2013.
- 71 These groups include the National Organization to Halt the Abuse and Routine Mutilation of Males (NOHARM) and the Circumcision Information and Resource Project (CIRP). There is another prominent web-based intactivist group, Peaceful Parenting, that comes across as secular in most of the work on its three interconnected websites (DrMomma.org, IntactNetwork.org, and SavingSons.org), yet which seems to be run by a Christian mother and offers many explicitly Christian intactivist resources directed at Christian parents.
- 72 <http://questioncircumcision.weebly.com/religion.html>. Accessed March 18, 2014.
- 73 <http://www.drmomma.org/2009/06/information-on-circumcision-for.html>. Accessed March 18, 2014.
- 74 Christians Against Circumcision on Facebook claims in bold letters, "Jesus was an intactivist who spoke out against circumcision." It is hard to imagine how they think this is the case, when the gospels record one incidence of Jesus mentioning circumcision, and that in a neutral manner (John 7:23). Perhaps every word of the Bible is spoken by God/Jesus himself. Or perhaps they are referring to a verse from the book of Mormon (Moroni 8). <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Christians-Against-Circumcision-Jesus-Was-an-Intactivist/154559224605917>. Accessed December 17, 2013.
- 75 As an example that subtly recapitulates these traditional Christian criticisms of circumcision, a pamphlet called "Christian Parents and the Circumcision Issue" reads: "Circumcision, as defined in the Old Testament (Genesis 17), was a symbolic act by which a Jewish male was entered into a covenant with God. It required the participants in this covenant to accept and obediently follow sanctions and strict commandments. Circumcision became the "badge of membership" within the covenant community. It became the distinguishing mark of being a Jewish male. The picture changes in the New Testament. The covenant with God for Christians is through acceptance and belief in the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ. By this New Testament covenant, Christians are enjoined not to submit to circumcision. Christian families are not bound to God through the mark of circumcision. As defined by the Apostle Paul, circumcision could be interpreted as contrary to the Christian faith and teachings. Although Paul speaks only with regard to religious ritual circumcision, it is uncanny how his [sic] statements in Titus 1:10-11 [*There are also many rebellious people, idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision; they must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for sordid gain what it is not right to teach.*] define the situation today. Circumcision was not simply viewed as a sign of the covenant community, but was viewed as a sign of separation. It was the *sine qua non* of being a Son of Abraham, in distinction to being a Christian." Excerpted from James E. Peron, MS, EdD, "Christian Parents and the Circumcision Issue," *Many Blessings*, vol. 3, Spring 2000.
- 76 Dietzen, Fr. John, "The Morality of Circumcision," *Catholic News Service*, October 2004.
- 77 Eric Kline Silverman, *From Abraham to America*, 230. Silverman attributes male intactivist rage to a variety of social complaints about contemporary society and social change, not to circumcision harm itself.
- 78 This stands in stark contrast to the plethora of resolutions passed on numerous other issues relating to sexuality.

These topics and their corresponding statements from many different denominations can be searched on the Religious Institute website. <www.religiousinstitute.org>

- 79 James E. Peron, MS, EdD, "Christian Parents and the Circumcision Issue," *Many Blessings*, vol. 3, Spring 2000.
- 80 Jim D. Bigelow, "Evangelical Christianity and Its Relationship to Infant Male Circumcision," in *Male and Female Circumcision: Medical, Legal, and Ethical Considerations in Pediatric Practice*, edited by Denniston, George C., Frederick Mansfield Hodges, and Marilyn Fayre Milos, 173-178 (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 1999), 174-175.
- 81 Dolores T. Puterbaugh, "Has religion dropped a notch below S&M?" *USA Today (Magazine)*, Nov. 11, 2011.
- 82 David Neff, "Criminalizing Circumcision," *Christianity Today*, Sept2011.
- 83 "Religion in America," *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity*, Oct2008, Vol. 21 Issue 8, p45-45, 1/4p.
- 84 One conservative Methodist pastor and scholar published an editorial in a clergy magazine arguing that biblical circumcision provides a good model for what conversion to Christianity should entail, as it is painful, peculiar, and permanent, just as religious conversion should be. Dan Nehrbass, "Circumcision as a Shadow of Conversion," *Clergy Journal*, Mar/Apr2009, Vol. 85 Issue 4, p53-54, 2p. Another Presbyterian pastor published a sermon extolling circumcision as a vivid and dramatic symbol, a gift from God that is strange but kind. Richard Winter, "Cutting and Washing: Circumcision and Baptism: Highly Appropriate Symbols in our Erotic Culture," *Presbyterion* 26/2 (Fall 2000): 67-83.
- 85 Richard Winter, "Cutting and Washing: Circumcision and Baptism."
- 86 Colossians 2:11-12, about spiritual circumcision and baptism, may refer to a circumcision done by Christ, rather than the literal circumcision of Jesus.
- 87 While this interpretation of Paul's views on Torah and circumcision is surprising to many Christians, it is well-established in mainstream bible scholarship under the titles "the new perspective on Paul" and the "radical" or "post" new perspective. A key difference between these perspectives is that the first replaces so-called Jewish legalism with Jewish ethnic particularism/boundedness in its conceptualization of Paul's enemy, but the new scholarship say that Paul was okay with ethnic (including circumcised) Judaism. For a helpful overview, see Magnus Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul: A Student's Guide to Recent Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009). Zetterholm compares the foundational work of E.P. Sanders, James D.G. Dunn, and N.T. Wright, with the more radical works of Gaston, Tomson, Stowers, Nanos, Johnson Hodge, Elliot, Ehrensperger, and Lopez. Two other post-NPP scholars include John Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Douglas A. Campbell, *The Quest for Paul's Gospel: A Suggested Strategy* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2005). See also the chapter on Paul and Judaism by Pamela Eisenbaum in *Studying Paul's Letters: Contemporary Perspectives and Methods*, edited by Joseph Marchal, 135-154 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).
- 88 Jewish scholar Daniel Boyarin points out that ancient devotees commonly accepted dramatic personal sacrifices to be part of certain sects. Daniel Boyarin, "'This We Know to Be the Carnal Israel': Circumcision and the Erotic Life of God and Israel," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Spring 1992): 474-506.
- 89 Andrew S. Jacobs posits this while admitting we don't know exactly what Paul's political strategies were in resisting or gaining favor with the Roman Empire; we can only guess at what they might have been. Andrew S. Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised: a Study in Early Christian History and Difference* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 20-23.
- 90 See especially the prophetic writings known as Isaiah. A pioneer of this approach to Paul was New Testament scholar and bishop Krister Stendahl. Jewish scholar Mark D. Nanos agrees with Stendahl and sees Paul as a theologically orthodox Jew. Nanos says that it was actually those gentiles and Jews who thought that gentiles

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- should be circumcised in the end times, who were departing from Jewish tradition. Mark D. Nanos, "Paul and Judaism," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Z. Brettler, 551-553, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- 91 When Stephen preaches on the Abrahamic covenant of circumcision; when Paul circumcises (the adult, consenting) Timothy because he has a Jewish parent; and when people tell Paul that local Jews are falsely accusing him of teaching other Jews to abandon circumcision.
- 92 Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*, 13.
- 93 In John 7:23, Jesus mentions the practice of Jewish infant circumcision as an example of a Jewish law that takes precedence over the law of keeping Sabbath.
- 94 Matthew Thiessen, Conclusion.
- 95 Jacob Jervell, "The Circumcised Messiah," in *The Unknown Paul: Essays on Luke-Acts and Early Christian History*, 138-45 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1984).
- 96 Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture*, 175.
- 97 Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Re-imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010); and Davina Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).
- 98 Andrew S. Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised*, 32-34.
- 99 Andrew S. Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised*, Conclusion.
- 100 Eric A. Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament's Troubling Legacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 82-85.
- 101 Marcus Page, personal communication, March 28, 2014.
- 102 Henry Abramson and Carrie Hannon, "Depicting the Ambiguous Wound: Circumcision in Medieval Art," in *The Covenant of Circumcision: New Perspectives on an Ancient Jewish Rite*.
- 103 In the context of his own original theology, Theodore Jennings provides an overview of theologians who have forwarded this view of a weak, co-suffering God in the 20th century, starting with Jurgen Moltmann. Theodore W. Jennings, *Transforming Atonement: A Political Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 199-216.
- 104 L. Michael White, *Scripting Jesus: The Gospels in Rewrite* (HarperOne, 2010), 337.
- 105 For example, see Elizabeth Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: a Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2006); Edward Kessler, "Mary – the Jewish Mother," in *Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Encounter*, 93-109 (London: SCM Press, 2013); and Mary C. Athans, *The Quest for the Jewish Mary: the Mother of Jesus in History, Theology, and Spirituality* (New York: Orbis Books, 2013).
- 106 For example, see Elizabeth Johnson in *Truly Our Sister*.
- 107 L. Michael White, *Scripting Jesus*, 337.
- 108 Amy Jill-Levine, commentary on the Gospel of Luke, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Z. Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 102.
- 109 *Orthodox Faith* 4.14, quoted from FC 37:366 in the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* volume 3 on

Luke, p. 50.

110 Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, *The Sexual Theologian*, Introduction.

111 Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture*, 169.

112 Elizabeth Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 280-281.

113 *Ibid*, 281-282.

114 This phrase comes from Kwok Pui Lan's analysis of similarities and differences between third-world feminist theologians working to change their patriarchal cultures from within and Jesus's relationship to his Jewish culture, in the context of her assessment of anti-Judaism within third-world feminist theology. Kwok Pui Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 94.

115 Eric Kline Silverman, *From Abraham to America*, 230-237.

116 My analysis is indebted to New Testament scholars Brigitte Kahl and Davina Lopez. See Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Re-imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010); and Davina Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

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